

Houses of the `Galo People of Arunachal Pradesh: Rituals and Taboos

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Abstract:

The `Galo are one of the major tribes mainly settled in the West-Siang district, Leparada district, and Lower-Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh. They are distinguished by a rich folk tradition encompassing both material and non-material culture. Their food, clothing, and dwellings each possess unique characteristics that reflect the identity of the Galo people. This article provides a comprehensive account of the traditional Galo house, including the materials and construction methods, the roles of community members, and the associated rituals and practices. It also examines daily activities within a Galo household.

Key word: `Galo Tribe; Traditional house; Rituals; Practices; Taboos.

INTRODUCTION

The `Galo tribe mainly settled in the West-Siang district, Leparada district, and Lower-Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh is classified as part of the Mongoloid group and speaks the Galo language as their native language, which is a branch of the Tibeto–Burman language family. Dialectal variation exists among the `Galo communities of Arunachal Pradesh across different regions of the district. The `Galo possess a rich tradition of oral narratives and are members of the Tani clan, which traces its lineage to the mythical ancestor Abo Tani. Other Tani clan tribes in Arunachal Pradesh include the Adi, Apatani, Nyishi, and Tagin.

The `Galo community practices animism, regarding nature as integral to both culture and religion. They worship Donyi-Polo (sun and moon), considered the manifestation of the supreme deity and the Creator of the world. Mo:pin is the main festival of the `Galo community, which they celebrate with great pomp and fervour on the 5th of April every year, for a good harvest and the well-being of the community. During this festival, Galo people from surrounding villages gather; women wear traditional white loincloths (jese ko:re) and tops, while men wear white pants, jackets (tango), and hats (bo:lup). Participants adorn themselves with traditional beads and coats, perform the po:pir dance, and smear a paste of rice flour on each other's faces during the celebration. Along with merrymaking, the festival is also marked by its unique rituals, which are performed by the shaman (`nyibo). The celebration usually lasts the entire month of April. Individual families also organise the Mo:pin festival and invite friends and relatives to join in the feasting.

The Galo tribe also has a unique pattern of naming their children, which is rhythmic in sound and also easy to remember even up to many forefathers, like Tani (first forefather)→Niito→To:po→Pona→Naur→Urchi→Chikar→`Karko→Ko:ri→Riba→Ba:ke→Ke:cha→Cha:ni→Ni:mə→Mali→Li:ma→Macho→Cho:mar→Marcha→Cha:kar→Karjum→Jumni→Ni:to→To:mo. This way, a `Galo can trace back himself to his first forefather, the Abotani. It also helps them in identifying generations within the same clan and guides them in addressing them as father, mother, brother, sister, daughter-in-law, etc.

THE `Galo house

The Galo reside in houses known as namə, constructed exclusively from wood, bamboo, fan-palm leaves, and rattan. These dwellings are typically built on slopes using locally sourced materials and specialized construction techniques. Construction occurs during the winter months, from December to February, following the harvest. Men are responsible for tasks such as gathering logs and bamboo, while women prepare food and brew local wine (po:ka) for the workers. Children contribute by collecting lighter materials, transporting rattan ropes and leaves, filling the hearth with soil, and digging drainage channels around the house.

Minor variations in dialects, rituals, practices, architectural styles, and terminology exist among Galo communities, depending on their geographic location.

STRUCTURE OF `GALO HOUSE

`Galo House is rectangular, raised from the ground on a slope. The average plinth area of the house ranges from 10x15 (150 sq. mt) to 15x20 (300 sq. mt). The height of the house, from ground to first floor, depends on the slope. In order to avoid the climbing of domestic animals like pigs and cows into the house, it is raised one or two meters above the ground. The height of the first-floor wall is 9 to 10 meters. The roof slopes at almost 45° on both sides of the ridge. At the front and back of the house, there are two side roofs to cover the verandas called mi:tik.

A traditional `Galo house has a single big inner hall, namra, where all the family members sleep in the different corners. Generally, a house has two hearths, imik in the inner hall: male hearth (pintə) and the female hearth (pimmeh). In olden days, a joint family had more than two hearths. Traditionally, the oven used to be of three stone pillars called li:chik. On four sides, the hearth is enclosed by a wooden frame called `gulu.

A `Galo House usually has two verandas ko:da, a big veranda in the front called (`nyilo ko:da), a male veranda, and in the back, a small veranda called `nyim ko:da (female veranda). The front veranda has a hearth with a shelf over it. The male veranda is used for large gatherings, and the family sits out there during the day. There are two narrow verandas (inyi:k) on both sides. At the back of the house, a pigsty (gumrə) is attached where pigs are kept. Previously, this was also used as a toilet. At one corner, a coop (`pərə) for keeping chickens is constructed. Generally, a `Galo house has two ladders (əba/ko:ba): a male ladder (`nyilo əba/ko:ba) and a female ladder (`nyim əba/ko:ba). Traditionally, a female, from the attainment of puberty till she attains menopause, avoids using the male ladder. Even some hunters, after killing a ferocious animal, do not use the common ladder, as it is used by children, too. They use a temporary ladder for a few days. There is also a small ladder called 'rogba' for chickens to climb up the house.

The inner hall of a `Galo house begins with a male door located either in the left corner or the right corner of the female veranda. Hearths are almost centrally located.

A portion of the house, to the right of the main door and in front of the male hearth, is called 'ba:go', which is mainly for fathers and grown-up sons. The inner front wall is where the animal's skull, teeth, fur, and feathers are kept. The frequent visit of grown-up females to this side is discouraged mainly because the skull and teeth are of ferocious animals. Respectable male guests are also given seats in the ba:go.

Nyo:də is the portion of the house right of the hearth where the mother mostly sits. The inner portion of the nyo:də, close to the wall, is the place where parents sleep. Nyo:də is the sacred portion of the house where the ritual images and horn of *Bos frontalis* (sob) sacrificed during marriage are hung horizontally. The basket (dohi ginchi) used during ritual ceremonies is also kept in the nyo:də.

Udu: is the portion of the house left on the hearth where male children and guests used to sit and sleep. The portion between the female's hearth and the male's hearth, where mostly the grown-up daughters and daughters-in-law sit, is called Nyo:s.

The portion right to the female's hearth and near to the female's door is called papo-ropə, where the mortar stands. One huge basket called pa:pum is kept to store rice husks. In between the papo-ropə and the nyo:də, there is an enclosed space with a gap in the ceiling called po:bor nenko, where, during any large-scale feasts, rituals, weddings, etc., a large conical basket is hung from the ceiling, and a huge quantity of rice/millet beer is brewed. At the back of the nyo:də, a long store called `kagri is hung where husked rice and other costly items are stored.

Na:ka is the ceiling of a house with a sufficient gap so that smoke can escape. Na:ka is also a shelf where crafted raw materials and chipped rattan ropes for house construction are kept, and where they are smoked to deter by powder post beetles.

A large shelf hung from the ceiling over the hearth to keep items like baskets, mats, yams and taro seeds, handles for an axe and a machete, readymade craft items, etc., is called Ka:i:k. Items kept on this shelf are smoked and protected from pests. It also prevents sparks from the hearth from reaching the ceiling and roof. The entry of rats and cats to the lower shelves where dried meat and fish are kept is also prevented. Another smaller shelf hung below the ka:i:k called `rabko. To dry rice grain, especially during rainy days. In its four corners, hang small baskets (chu:ka) to keep small items like matchboxes, knives, etc. The lowermost shelf close to the fire for quick roasting of items like raw meat and fish is Ka:lo/ka:me.

Generally, a `Galo house has two ladders (əba/ko:ba), `nyim əba/ko:ba (female ladder) and `nyilo əba/ko:ba (male ladder). After the attainment of puberty, females use only the female ladder, while males can use both, though the frequency of using female ladders is less.

COLLECTION OF RAW MATERIALS FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF `GALO HOUSE

The collection of materials for house construction is very tiring and time-specific. Not everyone is used to house construction; only certain trees are used for house construction. Durability is the main criterion for selecting certain trees. There are also certain trees considered inauspicious for construction. Generally, they avoid using trees that are peculiarly sized, knotty and deformed due to parasitic plants. They also avoid using immature materials. The time for collecting raw materials is always adjusted to the phase of the moon. This is done to prevent damage to materials from termites and powderpost beetles.

A small-scale collection of certain raw materials, such as rattan cane, has been carried out for many years in advance. While clearing the forest for shifting cultivation, if they happen to find any mature rattans, they collect them, split them, dry them in the sun and then finally keep smoking them on the ceiling. But for large-scale collection, a good number of male adults go to the identified forest to collect rattan. Collecting rattan rope is very difficult because its leaves and stems are thorny. The day before the construction, the bundle of smoked rattan ropes was kept soaked in water to soften and to remove the soot.

In the case of wood and bamboo, these items are felled well in advance and left to dry in the forest. When the fallen materials have completely dried, then the branches are removed (hi:da pi:nam) and kept piled in the forest. On any sunny day, these are brought to the construction site. Materials of different sizes and for different purposes are sorted and placed accordingly.

Bamboo for the wall (chentü) is also split well in advance and pressed in the forest at a sunny spot. When materials have dried completely and become light, they are brought to the construction site. But for the floor (nyo:pe), bamboo is brought to the construction site when it is still raw and split at the initial stage.

The fan palm leaves (takau patta) for the roof are collected months in advance and piled either in the forest or at the construction site. It is kept pressed for a month as a treatment to prevent pest damage. The bamboo rope (dirchi) for tying leaves to the roof frame is collected from the forest just before the construction. These are then distributed to every household with adult male members. On the day of construction, especially during roofing, all will take them to the site after chipping.

THE PROCESS OF HOUSE CONSTRUCTION AMONG `GALO

Ground Preparation:

Traditional houses are built on rolling slopes without levelling. That is the reason why one would find pillars at different heights. The pillars of the lower slope may be more than ten meters, whereas the pillar of the upper portion of the slope almost touches the ground. The length of the house is almost aligned along the contour.

Pillars:

When the layout and position of the house are decided by the expert elders, everyone starts digging holes at different points. It is always supervised by one or two elderly experts from the beginning through construction completion. As the house is constructed on the slope, hundreds of strong, straight & long wooden pillars are erected. The central pillar (Gi:lo) is the largest pillar. Holes of about one and a half to two feet are dug where pillars are erected. Sometimes, in new sites, a few grains of rice are buried in the ground with a chant by the shaman. After a few days, the grains are examined. If the grains are still intact and none have been missed, the spot is considered favourable. Otherwise, the site is considered not suitable for the family. In such cases, either the site is abandoned, or a curative ritual is performed by the shaman. Auspiciousness is read even from the liver of the chick, and for any animal sacrificed during house construction, the liver is always studied.

First floor:

A large amount of material is used until the first floor is constructed. Starting from the lowest beams to the floor, four to five layers of beams are laid. Most lower beams (ri:lo) are smaller but bigger. Gradually, the number of beams will increase, but they will be smaller. Just before laying the bamboo floor (nyo:pe), small beams (ri:mik) at a gap of three to four inches are fixed. The bottom of the house is supported by hundreds of supporting pillars (kətə:) ;both vertical and inclined are fixed to prevent the house from both horizontal and vertical displacement.

Ceiling (na:ka):

Generally, only two layers of beams are held across with a sufficient gap so that smoke from the hearths can be ventilated. Between the ceiling and the ridge runs a long, large, and straight beam called Ka:lo Jo:po.

Roof (mi:lo):

To fix the roof frame (robə:), the fan palm leaves are laid with a gap of almost one foot. Fixing leaves is very technical and must be done in a single day. Hence, it requires huge labour. At every one meter, young and adult people sit carrying a bundle of tying rope (dirchi) on their backs. Children ran around serving leaves and ropes to the elderly. Older people are engaged in serving the kabjen, a long, thin bamboo split on which leaves are fastened with a bamboo frame.

Wall (chikchi):

Generally, before roofing, walls are not constructed because they may obstruct the movement of man and material during roofing. First, the horizontal frames are fixed. Next, bamboo splits are fixed vertically with two layers; the inner portions of the bamboo splits face each other and are fastened to the frame, which is almost 9 -10 feet.

Fixing doors, shelves and pigsties and filling the hearths with soil:

Normally, a `Galo house has three hearths, one on the front veranda and two inside the house. When elderly people are busy fixing minor items, like doors and shelves. Children are also busy filling the hearths with soil and digging drains around the house. Only experts are engaged in the construction of pigsties.

RECIPROCIITY DURING HOUSE CONSTRUCTION

Building a Galo house requires significant human resources, food, raw materials, and time. Individual construction is nearly impossible without the collective support and cooperation of the entire village, including men, women, youth, and adults. Community cooperation is also essential for organising large-scale marriage ceremonies, performing major rituals, and constructing fences around the household. This collective effort is regarded as a moral responsibility within the community.

RITUALS ASSOCIATED WITH THE CONSTRUCTION OF A `GALO HOUSE

Rituals related to house construction are fewer than those related to agriculture. As mentioned, if a house is to be built in a new spot, the auspiciousness of the spot is examined by a shaman through burying rice grains or examining the liver of a chicken. In most cases, a small bamboo shaved image is wrapped around the pillar and smeared with rice paste. Before sacrificing any animal during house construction to feed the people helping in the construction, an altar is erected (for cows and bosfrontalis), and the animal is sacrificed after chanting. For a pig, no altar is erected. The expert examines the animal's liver.

RITUALS PERFORMED AFTER THE COMPLETION OF THE HOUSE

the completion of house construction, two rituals are performed to appease the house's deities and seek their blessing for the safe stay of the family members in the new house.

Namli`Yubnam

It is a belief that after the completion of construction, the house should be occupied immediately; otherwise, some prowling spirit may take shelter in it. But the owner of the house does not move to the new house immediately. On the first night, young boys and girls stay in the newly constructed house and enjoy the night of merry-making. The house's owner would provide enough food and drinks. The remaining meat, especially the heads of the cows slaughtered during house construction, is kept for this night. A few elders also stay to finish minor interior work, such as fixing shelves.

Namli cha:nam/Nam La:yapnam

On the second night, the family members shift to the new house, where a ritual called na:m la:yap is performed. An image called 'Agam' depicts a chicken being sacrificed. The chicken's blood is sprinkled on the image. The shaman, in his chanting, would thank the deity of the forest for providing raw materials and the family deities for protecting them throughout the process, from the collection of raw materials to the construction of the house. Further, he implores benevolent deities to bless the family for a safe stay in the new house and the proliferation of domestic animals. And requests the forest deity to avoid troubling the family since, from that fortnight, the owner of the house would own all the materials used in the construction. To symbolise it, family members patch two or three white chicken feathers into their hair with beeswax. Which are finally placed in the image (agam).

That night, all the villagers who had participated in the construction were invited to a grand feast. Village elders sing traditional folk songs, ya:nə, seeking blessings from the benevolent deities for the family members and also narrating how man learnt about house construction. The next day, it is taboo for family members; they avoid going into the forest or fields and stay in the village, busy setting up house and cleaning the surroundings.

TABOOS OBSERVED IN A `GALO TRADITIONAL HOUSE

There are many taboos or prohibitions associated with the traditional `Galo house, which are unique to `Galo society. These practices are rooted in many generations. In the `Galo society, the biological differences between males and females are strictly maintained. The womenfolk between puberty and menopause are restricted from using `nyilo ko:ba (male ladder), especially during their menstruation period; they refrain from using `nyilo ko:da (front veranda with hearth) and male doors. However, girls before puberty and women after menopause are free from such restrictions.

The girls, after entering puberty, and newly nursing mothers also refrain from sitting in the ba:go (front portion of the male hearth), because it is the place where all the hunted skulls of ferocious animals and hunting equipment are placed. It is believed that females are mothers and custodians of children who are also physically weaker. This prohibition, in one way, is to protect females from such evil souls. They believe that prohibiting females from using males' flats and preventing them from touching hunting equipment are meant to maintain the difference between males and females. There is always a division of work by sex. In the same way, grown-up males also avoid visiting a female's flat frequently.

The pim:ə (female hearth) is used by females during menstruation and childbirth. In olden days, people, after carrying dead bodies to the grave and after a snake bite, used to stay in the second hearth for a few days. All those restrictions are strictly followed as a system of society that has been passed down from generation to generation.

BELIEFS AND FAITHS ATTACHED TO THE HOUSE

Beliefs and faith related to house construction are limited. They believe that all materials collected from the forest belong to the forest deity. During the collection of such materials, they refrain from using abusive words and avoid making a hue and cry in the forest. They also believe that, in every house, there lives a family deity (ai-agam) who protects the family members. The corner of the house where parents sleep is considered sacred, as it is where the family deity dwells. Children believe that in the daytime, inside the house, a small spirit called Ka:chi bili lives. That is why, during the day, children usually fear entering the dark, silent big hall.

CHANGE IN CONTINUITY IN HOUSE PATTERN AND ITS USES

Modernization has reached even the most remote `Galo villages to varying extents. Currently, nearly all `Galo villages have access to compulsory elementary education, road connectivity, and electricity. These developments have resulted in observable changes in several aspects of village life.

One of the positive changes is the construction of rooms, especially for school-going children. In olden days, it was very difficult for a newly married couple to sleep in the common hall. Today, they have separate rooms; yet, aged people still sleep in the common hall.

Another change, which can also be called a positive and sustainable use of resources, is resting the house's pillars on a stone slab to prevent termites from damaging the wooden pillars by contacting the soil. But there is a slight risk; during a strong earthquake, a house may collapse. A few strong pillars should be set into the ground at all corners.

Another permanent change is the erection of permanent concrete pillars. It eliminates the need for hundreds of both vertical and inclined pillars. In some cases, even the floor beams are also fixed with

concrete. Today, many affordable people are going for timber-down walls and floors with CGI sheet roofing. One of the main reasons people have opted for permanent houses is the shortage of labour in the village, especially among youths and active workers, as it is difficult for elderly people to carry heavy materials from the forest for house construction.

As mentioned, pigsties were traditionally attached to the back of the house, which was also used as a toilet. Today, it has been discontinued, and separate pucca toilets are constructed a little away from the dwelling house, and Pigs are kept in an enclosure called *ærak gumpa*. Even the poultry are constructed separately, which used to be attached to the main house.

As such, the observance of taboos and restrictions has also been much relaxed in modern Galo society due to the impact of education and social change. However, these changes are not always uniformly accepted across the community.

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