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Echoes of the Past: The Cultural and Ecological Role of Traditional Hunting and Practices of the Galos of Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract

This paper discusses on the long persisting traditional hunting practices with special reference to the various traditional knowledge, beliefs and social status embedded at various stages of hunting and trapping methods among the Galo tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. Primarily an agricultural tribe engaged themselves in shifting or terrace cultivation. The indigenous people mostly have a cultural preference for wild meat, which has always been an integral part in their lives, most of the tribal communities continued hunting and gathering ways of life, although their numbers have continually declined, partly from the pressure from growing agricultural and pastoral communities. However, most of the tribe here still continues to have their own traditional methods of hunting, with women roughly as influential and powerful as men. Galo people did not followed a fixed hunting schedule but hunted when convenient or leisure time or during a cultural or ritualistic reasons. Hunting and trapping methods included traditional bows, arrows and spears, people also used poisoned arrows which has been a traditional practice since time immemorial. Blow guns were another methods which were also used. The indigenous methods also included stone fall, trigger and release, canopy, spring pole etc. Hunting has been a traditional practice of the people since time immemorial. The simple nature of hunting with limited technological equipment hints us to postulate parallels for hunting strategies for early people. The hunted animals and birds have been rich sources of protein and the wild meats formed a significant portion of their intake. However, certain taboos have also been associated. These taboos often served as spiritual balance between humans and nature. Certain rituals have also been associated particularly to avoid certain foods or abstain from social or personal interactions or intimacy before a hunt to show respect for the spirits of the forest and the creatures they intend to hunt. These practices symbolizes purification, humility, and acknowledgment of the sanctity of life. By following these taboos, the tribe ensured that hunting was carried out responsibly for survival and cultural continuity. These taboos has been practiced and maintained through folklores, myths, cultural beliefs etc. The sacred grooves and even individual trees or animals were preserved as a part of the tribes traditional beliefs. The people believed that certain deities resided in these forests, contributing to forest protection. It has also been observed that the hunters also had certain dreams before hunting. Dreams related symbols and signs determined the day of the hunters. Thus, the paper is a study which provides traditional information on hunting practices of the Galo tribe and also highlights the cultural use of wildlife by the people.

Introduction

Since time immemorial human kind has lived in a close-knit and often experienced precarious relationship with the natural world. Human-nature relation can never be separated, since long the hunt for forest resources for sustenance through trapping and hunting of animals for food has been one of the most ancient human activities. However hunting and trapping for food and other activities have had devastating effects on forest populations which has also led to the extinction of many species since long. With growing human population and glocalization, increased accessibility to remote forests and adoption of modern hunting methods like guns, bombs etc has made the problem more severe.

The paper describes the long persistent traditional hunting and trapping practices among the indigenous Galo tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. The tribe settled long time back in the dense forest and hills of North Eastern part of India were practice of hunting and trapping among its indigenous tribes were not merely a subsistence but a cultural drapes woven with threads of profound traditional knowledge, spiritual belief, and ancient wisdom. Hunting was performed traditionally with rudimentary tools like spears, bows, arrows fetched with bird feathers, ingenious traps made from bamboo, vines and stone and simple traditional traps were of great impact. The tribe hunted wild animals not only for consuming but also for games and also to ensure safety of the people however most commonly it was tamed for food consumption by the tribe.

Arunachal Pradesh lies in the Eastern Himalayan region which is also a part of the Indo-Myanmar biodiversity hotspot. The state habitats 26 indigenous tribes and numerous minor tribes as well, people here has been primarily agriculturist as they performed shifting or terrace cultivation and most of the lands belongs to the indigenous people in which these communities have lived for generations and managing land under ancestral ownership. These indigenous group of people mostly have a cultural preference for wild meat which has been an integral part in their life although today their numbers have continually declined due to agricultural expansion, pastoral encroachment and external pressures. Nearly all the tribe of the state still continues to have their own traditional methods of hunting. It was primarily a practical activity performed by the Galo people when convenient but it became a scheduled ritual during special occasions.

The tribe mostly settled in West Siang, East Siang and Upper Siang district of the state have been breeding animals apart from agriculture, thus they have a broad diversity of food gathering techniques. The tribe since time immemorial has depended on forest for their settlement and subsistence. Forest have always played traditional role for the community and has significantly met the resource needs for the community. The wild plants and animal food has been a major part of the food resources among most of the tribal people of the state. The state has been blessed with rich natural resources.

Agriculture has been the basic means of livelihood of the tribe and for the betterment of production and good harvest many ritualistic activities were performed. Festival of harvest *Mopin* has been in practice by the tribe since time immemorial. The festival has been deeply rooted in agrarian traditions it marked the season of abundance and gratitude to the deities for a successful harvest. During the festival animals such as pigs, mithun (*Bos frontalis*) and cows were offered as sacrifice while peerforming sacred hymns chanted by priests. These ritualistic chants were believed to purify the surroundings and to invite blessings of health, prosperity and protection from misfortune. It was believed that the festival brought the community together in joyous celebration through dance, song and shared feast.

Nonetheless the simple nature of sacrificing or hunting animals with limited technological equipment hinted to postulate parallels for hunting strategies for early people. Consuming meat was culturally imp-

ortant for the people. It was regarded and valued than any other types of foods. The distribution and consumption of sacrificed or hunted meat were however governed by strict rules and rituals. Certain parts of an animal were reserved for elders, chiefs, or used in specific ceremonies reinforcing social structure. However women and children were not allowed to touch or eat certain parts of the hunted meat.

A study conducted by Hilaluddin and Ghose (2005:169-179) on the patterns of wild meat extraction and consumption by indigenous tribal communities in North east India showed that the dependency on the forest by exploiting wild meat significantly contributed to their local economy. Some of the hunted animals were deer, wild boar, wild goat, field rat, *mithun,* squirrel, porcupine, jungle cat, trap birds, fish etc. People here believed that certain body parts of animals were meant only to be eaten by the elders or male members of the society and children and female were forbidden from eating certain portions like the brain and the tongue. Thus people in the early period have not only relied upon the provision of nature to meet their daily needs but at the same time they also had modified the environment in order to make it better suited their needs for subsistence.

Traditional Hunting practices of the Galos:

Galo people have often hunted individually or in groups, they also used local dogs immensely for chasing the prey and hunting purposes. Domestication of dog has led to a symbiotic relationship with the tribe from the very period. Usually after the hard and tiresome hunt, dogs were fed the tail and leg portions of the animal. Since time immemorial it was a custom to gift the hunted animals head and neck portion to the hunter who killed the wild beast, traditionally to preserve and display it as a mark of honor and bravery. The skull were often cleaned and decorated which symbolized the hunter's courage and skill, while the skeletal neck represented respect for the spirit of the animal, it used to be decorated inside or at the entrance of the house as a token of prestige and success in traditional hunting and rest of the parts were distributed among the villagers as a celebration.

However it has also been observed that people would set various traps deep inside the forest leaving them unattended for several days. Typically, these traps were checked only after a gap of three to four days to see whether any animals have been caught. This method reflected not only the community's reliance on traditional trapping techniques but also their understanding of animal movement patterns as the traps were strategically placed along known trails and feeding grounds. It was also common for the Galo hunters to anoint their arrowheads which were extracted from local plants procured from the forest itself, must have been traditional knowledge handed down through generations that made the strike swift and certain.

Bamboos were another substances which were used to make arrows for special automatic trigger which released traps, it was believed to be more powerful than other arrows. Catapults were made to hunt small birds and squirrels. People had another creative characteristics or strategies in which a broken bamboo stick or leaves were used to imitate calls to lure animals. People here used another traps as well known as stone traps, canopy traps, twig traps, pitt fall, trigger and many more. Every household possessed the hunting tools and most of the houses decorated hunted skeletal structures in their houses. The skin of deers, boars, wild bear were also decorated to show case prestige for their ancestors.

Traditional Fishing methods:

Fishing has also been a medium of food supply but it also brought members of the clan together and kni-

tted the community further. Fishing was considered not just an economic activity but also an important part of traditional process which was passed on to the successive generation through community fishing.
The geographical and demographic distribution of the tribes habitation has been known for its humid climate with heavy rainfall in some areas that supplied perennial water sources in the small and big rivers like *Siyom* also known as *Yomgo* river, *Hiru-Hiri*k and *Sipu* is another big river which also has numerous tributaries. However unlike seasonal rivers that dries up these rivers flows year round. These rivers acted as the lifeblood of the region which served as natural sources of water and centered human settlement. These rivers has been the provider of rich fish resources. Rivers flowed through fresh forested mountains keeping the water clean which helped the fish populations stay healthy. Therefore people knew the art of fish breeding and fishing through different means.
Since time immemorial community fishing has been a traditional practice of the people here, the entire village participated in catching fish collectively, reflecting unity, cooperation and harmony with nature, it represented the cultural heritage of the Galos were men, women, young and even children took part in it. The tribe practised it mainly during the winter season. Apart from hunting Galo men were good fishermen as well. They even knew the movements of fish underwater and different verities of fish in distinct.
However as the people actively participated in area, they used certain type of wild plants as ethno-toxic (fish poison) and gathered lots of fish for consuming. Some popular traditional methods of fishing were hand-gathering, trapping, stationary enclosure, indigenous basket-shaped wicker traps, bamboo weirs and use of different aids to catch the fish.
Nonetheless there has been certain taboos on sacrificing or hunting wild animals and birds. These taboos were practiced and maintained through folklore's, myths, cultural beliefs etc. Oral sources has always been an important sources and a means of preserving and passing down collective knowledge, beliefs, and cultural practices from one generation to another. Galo people considered sacred groves, individual trees and even certain animals as a part of their traditional beliefs. The people held that these natural entities were the abodes of deities and ancestral spirits. Such beliefs contributed significantly to the protection of forests which contributed in reflecting the community's deep respect for nature and its spiritual connection with the environment.
It has been also observed that dreams were regarded a very powerful traditional belief systems as was believed to be an indicators influenced a hunter’s fate. Various dream symbols were interpreted to predict success or failure in hunting. Dream related symbols and signs determined the day of the hunters. For instance when a hunter dreamt of a person dying he was sure to succeed in hunting the next day. However, there has been certain restrictions which the hunters had to follow before going for hunting. Taboos also mentioned that interactions or exchanging unnecessary talks or encountering women during their menstrual cycle were traditionally considered inauspicious. These beliefs were rooted in the cultural notion of ritual purity and the harmony between human actions and spiritual forces which were thought to influence the outcome of the hunt.
The hunting weapons were always kept away from the reach of women and children before leaving for hunting a ritual practice was as such that men should not touch a dog or sleep with a woman or he was not allowed to talk to any person on his way as it was believed inauspicious. Different rituals were performed for various spiritual deities and spirits. The entire process revolved around offering adoration to seek permission from the concerned deities. Hence, rituals associated with hunting practices were performed to please the spirits of the deities.

The Present Scenerio of the Galos:

The hunting rituals of the Galos were associated with their beliefs which has been deep rooted in their culture since time immemorial. In the very early period people hunted for food or for leisure activities and prestige in the society. Nonetheless with the advent of modernization and changing socio-economic conditions, the cultural significance of hunting has considerably diminished. In earlier times, hunting served as a demonstration of valor and a means to gain prestige and recognition within the tribe. Today however, as access to education and modern employment opportunities expands, the younger generation increasingly values academic and professional achievements over traditional displays of bravery. Consequently, hunting has transitioned from a vital cultural activity to a symbolic tradition, remembered more for its heritage than its practice.

The population density of the state here is one of the lowest in India although it's rich biodiversity has become a hub of scientific explorations leading to the discovery of new species. In 2003 a new race of Scalter's Monal *Lophophorous Scateri arunachalensis* was discovered in the *subansiri* region (Kumar and singh 2004). A new species of primate, the Arunachal macaque *Macaca munzala* was discovered from *Tawang* district in 2004 (Sinha et al.2005). In 2006, a new bird species, the *bugun Liocichla liocichla bugunorum* was discovered near eaglenest wildlife sanctuary in western Arunachal (Athreya 2006). Of late Arunachal Pradesh has become the focus of National and International wildlife research and conservation.

Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that still in some remote Galo villages culture prestige of hunting has been a motivating factor, even today we see some village men not willing to stop hunting. The cultural prestige attached to hunting persists as a significant motivating force. Some men still take pride in this traditional pursuit viewing it as an expression of ancestral heritage identity. Their continued reliance on indigenous ecological knowledge which has been passed down through generations reflects its enduring importance in guiding social behavior, sustaining livelihoods, and shaping cultural values within the community.Therefore people use their old age indigenous knowledge which plays an important role in shaping their life and culture.

Indigenous Hunting Methods and Implements:

Traditional Persistence Hunting: Prior to any invention of modern weapons, persistence hunting with spears and dogs were one of the most efficient and common forms of hunting. Some traditional persistence hunting included-

- **Hunting with dogs (*Keeruk*):** Dogs were extensively used and employed for hunting animals. They usually gave signals by barking once they sensed the presence of animals in the jungle.
- **Hunting with spears (*Nebu*) :** Hunting with spears was another common practice before the invention of modern weapons and devices. Spears were made of bamboos and woods known as *Nebu* in Galo tribe.
- **Hunting with catapult:** Catapult served as an indigenous hunting device widely used in tribal communities since time immemorial and has been in existence even today.Typically a Y shaped wooden frame fitted with elastic strips. This device was used generally for hunting small birds and animals. However it cannot be denied that even today catapult remains a symbol of traditional craftsmanship and childhood hunting techniques.
- **Bamboo arrow Traps (*Upuk*):** A traditional hunting implement made from slender bamboo split with pointed end.

- **Bamboo snares (G*oree*):** Made of bamboo and cane. It was used to set up in rice fields and in jungles for birds and smaller ground dwelling animals. Snares were usually set up in the jungles with fences made on each side to guide animals and birds toward a specific path. The fencing helped induce the prey to move in the desired direction, where the snare was placed to capture them.

Different Types of Traditional Bamboo Snares

A) Rope snares (*sitic*): Very similar to bamboo snares. It was generally set for animals like deer. Commonly made from rope and vines. Hunters would make a kind of loop at one end of the rope and carefully placed across the path, while the other end would be tied to a firm support such as a tree or a strong branch. Thus when an animal passed through the loop, it would tighten around the neck or leg, trapping the animal. In some cases, fences or guiding sticks were placed on both sides to lead the animal toward the snare.

B) Traditional fall trap (*Gosuk*): Commonly employed for trapping animals. Another traditional structure constructed by suspending a heavy log, often weighed with stones, The log would be held in a position were typically a stick is connected to a string. When an animal passes underneath and disturbs the stick, the string releases, causing the log to fall and trap the animal beneath it. This ingenious device reflects the indigenous knowledge and skill of the Galo tribe in utilizing natural materials and understanding animal behavior.

Indigenous Technique of Catching Fish: The indigenous traps were designed in such a way to make entry of the fish easy and exit difficult. Traps were made with various forms: conical, cylindrical and basket type. However different types of bamboo baskets were used as follows:-

A) *Raajuu,* Made Of Bamboo for Catching Fish

- ***Quo nunam(ubnam)*:** Catching fish by bare hands. This technique involved putting one's bare hands between the gaps of the stone inside water to catch fish.
- ***lwwruu ubnam*:** This technique also includes using bare hands to catch fish however this technique was usually practiced during the breeding season when fish carried eggs and their movements becomes slow, making them easier to catch. The method required skill, patience, and knowledge of fish behavior . It reflected the deep connection of the community with their natural environment and their sustainable way of harvesting aquatic resources.
- ***Tahum-kunam*: A** traditional fishing technique practiced among the Galo community, primarily used for catching prawns and small fish in streams and shallow water bodies. This method involved the use of a specially crafted conical basket known as **raajuu**, made entirely from bamboo. The basket has been designed with a broad mouth and a narrow tip allowing water to flow through while preventing the captured prawns or fish from escaping. The *raajuu* is lightweight, durable and easy to handle making it an efficient tool for subsistence fishing. It is generally the **womenfolk** who would engage in this method often working together along stream banks where prawns tend to accumulate. They place the conical basket against the water current or gently push it along the riverbed allowing the natural movement of water to guide the prawns into the wider opening. Once inside the tapered end restricts their escape. After collecting the catch, women folks transfers the prawns or small fish into a smaller bamboo container called G**inci**. This compact basket serves as a carrying vessel keeping the catch secure while they continued fishing or return home. Overall, *Tahum-kunam* reflected the community's deep understanding of local aquatic ecosystems and their skill in crafting

eco-friendly tools from natural resources. It also highlighted the significant role women played in traditional fishing practices and household subsistence activities.

- ***Ta'kom-gaanam*:** Made up of split bamboo, hand woven long funnel shaped wicker. People would fix it overnight underwater in the opposite direction of water current. It is another technique used by the people from the very early times.

Conclusion:

From the earliest stages of human evolution hunting has played a vital role in sustaining communities across the world. Although many societies had gradually shifted toward agriculture and animal husbandry still hunting has continued to survive as an important cultural practice in several regions. In India, particularly in Arunachal Pradesh, hunting remains deeply embedded in the traditions, belief systems, and identity of various tribes.

Among the Galo community hunting was not merely an act of procuring food but it represented a way of life that reflected their intimate relationship with nature. Their hunting rituals, taboos, and practices has been closely intertwined with traditional belief systems that have been passed down through generations. Whether conducted individually or as a group, hunting carries cultural significance, social value, and symbolic meaning within the tribe.

The use of traditional devices, traps, and indigenous techniques showcases the community's deep ecological knowledge and their ability to adapt to the local environment. Moreover, the customs observed after a successful hunt such as sharing meat, performing rituals, or following specific taboos highlights the role of hunting in reinforcing social ties and cultural identity.

Even in the face of modernization and changing livelihoods, the Galo people more or less continue to preserve aspects of their hunting heritage. For them hunting is not only a practical skill but also a marker of bravery, prestige, and ancestral legacy. Therefore, hunting remains intrinsically connected to their culture serving as an enduring link between the past and the present.

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2. Personal interview with Shri Tumge Ete, Farmer and local leader, Village Bene, interview date: 10/01/2016.
3. Personal interview with retired (Teacher)Shri Kirdo Ete, Village Bene, interview date: 1/10/2021.