

The Role of the Nyibu in Galo Marriage Ceremonies: A Study of Ritual, Tradition, and Social Significance

Mojee Karlo¹, Nikam Mangfi²

¹Student, Political Science

²Student, History

Abstract

This Paper is about the ritual significance and procedural complexity of marriage ceremonies among the Galo people of Arunachal Pradesh, India, with particular attention to the indispensable role of the *Nyibu* (priest) in facilitating these ceremonies. Two principal forms of marriage ceremony are identified and described: the *Nyame Laayap*, a simpler and obligatory rite that formally establishes a couple as husband and wife, and the *Toguu Panam*, an elaborate and extravagant ceremonial process that spans an entire calendar year. Through ethnographic fieldwork and oral testimonies collected from knowledgeable community members, priests, and village elders across West and East Siang districts, this study maps the sequential rituals, divination processes, material requirements, priestly attire, and fee structures associated with the *Toguu Panam*. The article demonstrates that the *Nyibu* is not merely a ceremonial officiant but a spiritual intermediary whose guidance, legitimized by ancestral and benevolent spirits, is central to the successful completion of marriage rites. The study further highlights how these ceremonies reinforce social cohesion, ancestral veneration, and cultural continuity within Galo society. While acknowledging ongoing social change, the article argues that the role of the *Nyibu* and the values embedded in Galo marriage traditions remain deeply relevant as long as the community upholds its customs.

Keywords: *Galo*, *Nyibu*, *Toguu Panam*, *Nyame Laayap*, marriage ceremony, ritual, Arunachal Pradesh, indigenous religion, priest, divination

Introduction

The Galo tribe is one of the major tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, inhabiting West Siang, Lepa Rada, and Lower Siang districts, and also found in parts of Upper Siang, Lower Dibang Valley, Namsai, and Upper Subansiri districts. The Galo language belongs to the *Tani* group of the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family. In Galo society, the priest is called the *Nyibu*, who plays a very important role in the community. It is believed that the *Nyibu* is the mediator between the human world and the spiritual world. He or she is considered as the mouthpiece of the people, communicating their grievances and sufferings to the spirits to request redress.

The *Nyibu* performs all sorts of religious rites and ceremonies, conducts sacrifices, and solemnizes all socio-religious functions, including individual rites connected with life cycle events, ailments, festivals, and illness. He or she invokes blessings of the spirits on behalf of the people. Thus, the main duty of the

Nyibu is to offer sacrifices and appease the spirits and deities after divination through examination of chicken liver and eggs. It is due to this role that society has conferred upon them the highest authority of religious administration; however, the concept of a formal religious head or administration is absent.

In Galo society, anyone can become a priest regardless of their sex and status; however, a person to become a priest must be chosen by the *Yirne-gone* (spirits). The priests are born, not made or trained. It must be understood that the priesthood is not a full-time job and the role of priest is not only restricted to religious performances alone. Apart from being a priest, they are also engaged in government jobs, business, farming, entrepreneurship, politics, or any profession of their choice of livelihood. The main objective of this paper is to bring out the importance of the priest in the marriage ceremony among the Galo.

Role of Nyibu in Marriage Ceremony

The concept of marriage to solemnize two people is common to every society and it can be observed that the priest plays an important part in it. The marriage ceremony among the Galo is known as *Layapnam* and the process is known as *Nyida*. There are two types of marriage style: one is called *Nyame Layap* and the other is known as *Toguu Panam*, and in both these rituals the role of the *Nyibu* is essential — without him or her, the rituals cannot be performed.

The *Nyame Laayap* is the simplest form of marriage, and without this ritual no couple can be addressed as husband and wife in Galo society. In the *Nyame Laayap*, the priest calls the spirits of the house to acknowledge the new couple and to bless them with good fortune. Here, the couple is made to sacrifice a hen, after which the *Nyibu* sticks some feathers of chicken along with beads in the hair of the couple as a blessing of *Ai-Agam*, after which the couple is pronounced as husband and wife. On the other hand, the *Toguu Panam* is an extravagant marriage ceremony. This cannot be performed by every individual or a family; therefore, it is not a compulsory ritual to be performed. To understand *Toguu Panam* we need to discuss it in detail.

The Toguu Panam: An Overview

The *Toguu Panam* is a marriage celebration which takes several months for its preparation. The fact that it is lengthy and extravagant means that not everyone can afford it. This ritual was performed in earlier times to demonstrate the wealth of one's family or to boast about one's social status. The Galo people have a specific season for conducting marriages, mostly observed during the winter season, predominantly between October and April. They believe that during this season, the *Ali-Ampir* and *Ai-Agam*, along with other benevolent spirits, arrive to bless the people. Therefore, all benevolent festivals and celebrations are performed during this season. The *Toguu Yulo* is one of them. Throughout the preparation of *Toguu Panam*, the *Nyibu* guides the respective family members in every ritual associated with the ceremony. The first step towards this marriage process is to select the priest. For this, a *Nyikok* performs a divination process called *Piipii Chikanam* (a process where an egg is used) or *Ro Kokkanam* (using a chick's liver) to decide which priest is chosen by *Yirne-gone* for performing the *Toguu Yulo* of that family. *Toguu* cannot be performed by any random *Nyibu*; it is performed by a senior priest known as *Nyibu Jikte* or *Nyibu Bute*. After finding the right *Nyibu* through the divination process, the family member of the groom approaches him or her for the rituals. It is only after the acceptance of the chosen *Nyibu* that the future course of *Toguu Panam* starts.

The *Nyibu* then performs a ritual called *Yulo Kognam*, where the *Nyibu* seeks the permission of *Togu* from the spirit *Toii Pade*. After getting approval from the *Toii*, the first step towards the *Togu Panam* is started by a ceremony called *Siima Taknam* or *Sitak Taknam*, where a particular kind of wood (tree) used for construction of *Togu sogi* (the structure for tying the *Mithun* in a line) is cut down and split in the jungle itself, brought to the village, and kept in a particular manner outside the house to be dried in the sun. While the wood is being dried, the priest performs the first ritual of *Toguu* called *Yume Uii*, where pigs and fowls are sacrificed. Then the groom's party goes to the bride's house with *Yume adinopo* and gifts such as *Mithun*, cattle (alive), and fish and meats of various animals to decide the date for the actual *ToguYulo*. After this, the actual divination process known as *ToguYulo* starts to determine the kind of offering to be given to the *Dinyi-Yulo*. Here it is also decided which body parts of the *Mithun* are to be distributed among the different deities.

Ritual Performances and Ceremonies

The *Nyibu* invokes the *ToguuUii* and at night the whole village gathers at the groom's house and performs a dance called *Nyida Hoonam*. Afterwards, a ritual called *Loobu Henam/Ranam* is performed, where two or four pieces of tender bamboo (*Bambusahemiltonii*) are brought from the nearby forest, cut just above the roots, and must not be broken up to the tip. These are then erected across the roof of the house from one side to the other, forming the image of an 'X' at the top of the house. This is followed by a ritual of *Toi Garnam* at night by the priest.

After all these preparations, on the day of the fixed date for the *Nyida*, the bride's party finally arrives at the groom's house. The *Nyida* party is received by the groom's party members at the outskirts of the village. Here two types of rituals are performed: on the one hand the priest performs the ritual of warding off evil spirits which may be accompanying the *Nyida* party, and on the other hand the groom's party performs the welcome dance called *Nyida Pariknam* or *Nyida terriknam*.

Here, a ceremony called *Richak-Puchak Gagrik Sinam* is conducted where the groom comes to receive the bride with a bow and arrow, and from here the bride and groom lead the *Nyida* party to the groom's house. While reaching the groom's house, the bride is allowed to enter by a special stairway made exclusively for the ceremony called *Namya Koba* or *Namsa Koba*, which signifies a pure and fresh entrance for the bride, so that she may bring all good fortune to the house. She is supposed to enter the house by climbing through the *Namya Koba* or *Namsa Koba* along with the groom only.

After entering the house, the priest performs a ritual known as *Ebak Lanam*, where the bride's side of the family is introduced to the spirits such as *Ai-Agam*, *Rete-Bakte*, and *Chido-Nyode* of the groom's house. It is believed that every household has its own spirits which look after them. Here the spirits *Taloo-Tanya* and *Miiku-Maaku* are asked to bless the bride, and after which, finally, the *Toguu Panam* ritual is performed. This ritual is performed by sacrificing the *Hobe* or *Sobo* (*Mithun*) by the bride's party.

Before the sacrificing of *Hobe* or *Sobo*, the bride's side has to pay for each *Hobe* or *Sobo* that will be sacrificed, and this exchange is called *Yetak Parnam*. The payment is made in kind, consisting only of *Adam* (brass plate) and *Tadok* (beads) of high value. After the *Yetak Parnam*, a specific chant is performed by the learned person called *Kaben-Kabnam*, in which the orator narrates the story behind the sacrificing of the *Hobe*. It tells about how the *Hobe* came to this earth, how people started rearing them, and why they are sacrificed today. It is a kind of farewell song for the *Hobe*.

Finally, the sacrificing is done with *Gitum* (axe) by the bride's brother. It is performed to mark each and every *Hobe* for specific *Uii*'s. After this, on the next day, *Riga-Nama* is performed in order to bid farewell to *Toi Pade*, the spirit of *Toguu*, and to seek blessings for the family. After all these rituals the bride and groom have to observe certain social taboos for a calendar year. After the completion of one year, a ceremony known as *Riinyo Lignam* is performed by the priest, in which a few pigs and fowls are sacrificed to the *Toguu* spirit. This literally means the last rite. With this, the marriage ceremony of *Toguu Panam* is concluded. Thus, the Galo marriage ceremony of *Toguu Panam* takes overall one calendar year to complete.

Essential Materials for *Toguu Panam*

There are materials without which the *Toguu Panam* cannot be performed. They are: *Ripa* (a brace matel), *Chitum Rogne* (a hen which is not to be sacrificed), *Mari Kiimen* (a male dog), *Sira Ngopi* (a specific kind of fish which should be caught only by bare hand without using any kind of trap or poison), *Tatu* (a particular kind of tree), *Kebo* (a bunch of white Yak's tail hair which is colored with *Tamen* to make it red), and *Rokse* (traditional sword).

Fees of the *Nyibu*

The service of the *Nyibu* is paid by the host family in kind or cash. The amount of the fee is determined by the nature of sacrifices. In *Nyame Layap*, a brass bowl known as *Malu* of traditional value is given to the *Nyibu* as a fee. In the *Toguu Panam*, a brass plate of traditional value known as *Barku* or *Barte*, which is equal to the value of one *Mithun*, and also one of the left legs of the sacrificed *Mithun*, is given to the *Nyibu*. In *Riinyo Liknam*, a *Malu* or *Churgen* or old beads of traditional value is given.

Attire of the *Nyibu* for *Toguu Panam*

The dresses and attires are a very important part of ritual performances. The type of dress to be worn by a priest is communicated by the concerned spirits. For performing marriage ceremony rituals, the priest wears a special kind of attire called *Gilli-Talap* with *Kori-Kotik*. The *Gilli* consists of a cap made out of bamboo cane to which a cock's tail feather is attached, and the *Talap* consists of the tail feather of *Pega* (hornbill), *Nani gili*, and *Riri punyo* (a specific kind of bird), along with *Tabo* (a marked bamboo which shows the number of *Toguu* performed by the priest). *Jete* (cloth), *Telu* (belt), and *Rokse/Yokse* (a traditional sword) are mandatory attire for them, along with *Nyoi* or *Nyoduu*, a tooth of tiger or lion.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that change is a constant phenomenon which is bound to happen, and the Galo society too is changing with time; however, its traditions and their values remain the same. The importance of the priest in the marriage ceremony is still relevant to the society as long as the society maintains its traditions and customs. The study of Galo marriage ceremonies reveals that the *Nyibu* is far more than a simple officiant; they are the essential spiritual bridge between the human and spirit worlds. Whether performing the obligatory *Nyame Laayap* or the year-long, prestigious *Toguu Panam*, the priest's presence is mandatory to legitimize the union and secure the blessings of benevolent spirits like *Ai-Agam*.

The intricate rituals—ranging from egg and liver divination to the symbolic sacrifice of the *Mithun*—serve to reinforce social cohesion, ancestral veneration, and the preservation of Galo cultural identity. While modern life has introduced significant social changes, the role of the *Nyibu* remains a cornerstone of Galo society. As long as the community continues to uphold its indigenous customs and traditional values, the spiritual authority and guidance of the *Nyibu* will remain deeply relevant

To collect these materials, the authors interviewed priests, elders, and knowledgeable persons of the village, and also personally participated in the process of marriage ceremonies.

References

1. Galo English Dictionary, Compiled by Galo. Language Committee, Itanagar, 2009.
2. Ai-Agam – a benevolent spirit considered as goddess of fortune.
3. Tuguu Yulo – rituals associated with the marriage. system
4. Nyikok – a learned person.
5. Extract taken from interview with Bajum Karlo, Gogar Village, West Siang on 17.10.2015.
6. Extract taken from interview with Rilin Ngulom, Gogar Village, West Siang on 20.10.2015.
7. Ibid., Rilin Ngulom.
8. Op.cit., Bajum Karlo.
9. Extract taken from interview with Mii Kadu, Loglu Village, East Siang on 17.11.2015.
10. Extract taken from interview with Tama Mindo, Lirum Village, West Siang on 08.10.2015.