

Understanding the Role of Priest among the Galo Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract

This paper is about the role and significance of the Nyibu (priest) in the socio-religious life of the Galo tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, an indigenous community residing in the East Siang, West Siang, and Leparada districts. The Galo, who belong to the Tani branch of the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family, rely on a rich oral tradition to preserve their cultural heritage, and the Nyibu stands as its central custodian. Drawing on primary fieldwork interviews conducted between 2015 and 2016, this study explores the multifaceted functions of the priest across the entire social life cycle from birth and marriage to death, economic activity, warfare, and epidemic response. The paper highlights the practice of divination (Kaanam) as an indispensable diagnostic ritual, the symbolic significance of dreams in priestly guidance, and the Nyibu's dual role as both spiritual mediator and community decision-maker. The study finds that the Nyibu is not a full-time religious specialist but integrates sacred responsibilities with everyday occupations, underscoring the organic embeddedness of priesthood within Galo social fabric. While modernisation, education, and religious conversion pose challenges to the continuity of these traditions, the paper argues that the Nyibu remains an irreplaceable pillar of Galo indigenous identity. The study contributes to the anthropological understanding of tribal religious specialists in Northeast India and calls for sustained documentation of indigenous knowledge systems before they are irreversibly lost.

Keywords: Nyibu, Galo tribe, Arunachal Pradesh, divination, indigenous religion, Donyi-Polo, tribal priesthood, oral tradition, Northeast India

Introduction

The sacred custodian/specialist or priest is the guardian of tribal faith and belief. Without them there cannot be any indigenous practices among the tribal community. They are the central focus of life from time immemorial till present times. Their origin can be traced from the oral tradition- myths, legends and folklore. Galo is an indigenous community which resides on the East Siang, West Siang and Leparada District of Arunachal Pradesh. Galo is a language of Tani branch of the Tibeto-Burman family. Due to lack of written script, they do not possess any written history of the past, however they are very rich in oral history which has been passed down from one generation to the other. Despite the inconclusive date, it is believed that long ago, the ancestor of the Galo lived in the Tibetan region and on the fringes of the Indo-Tibetan frontier, from their stream of migrating families came down from time to time from upper areas and in absence of adequate geographical knowledge they followed the easiest track.¹ The religious demography is divided into three main religions, Donyi-polo, Christianity and Hinduism. The first

religious category accepts the authority of the priest which in they call *Nyibu*. They are the traditional sacred custodian of the faith.

In order to understand the authority and responsibility of a tribal priest in a community, it is important to highlight their roles and function. The first objective is to analyse the significance of *nyibu* in social cycle, from birth to death. Secondly, to highlight its relevance.

Role of Nyibu in the Galo society

According to the Galo community, the priest has always played a vital role from the start of humankind. The people believe there It must be understood that the priesthood is not a fulltime job and the role of priest is not restricted towards the religious performances alone. They also live a normal life and does government jobs, business, farming, entrepreneur, politician or any profession of their choice for their livelihood. Mogi Ori, a priest from Aalo, is also a political interpreter, Phuke Zirdo – priest from Ego village is a farmer. The *Lime Nyibu*, Tunge Imgo is an army ex-serviceman. But, whenever they are approached to do rituals, they must be always ready for it. No matter how fat it may be or how much time it may take. It is their duty assigned by the spirits *Yirneh-Goneh* and hence their social obligation. According to the Galo people, the priest has always played a vital role from the very start of the mankind. It can be said that their won't be any indigenous Galo society without *nyibu*, they are the pillars of their society. Every aspect of their life from personal to social, revolves around the *nyibus*. The priest is needed in all the rituals of the Galo like in child birth, death, cultivation, harvesting, during sickness, marriages and warfare.

In the Galo society we do not find any kind of image worship, but we do find makebelief images of the spirits made out of bamboo shavings, different leaves and herbs. Every image differs from other in its shape, size and even the materials such as leaves and herbs also do differ, it is constructed according to the guidance given by the priest during the time of ritual performance. Miken Dini narrates that the image of spirit and materials needed for its constructions is told to them by the spirit or *Uyii* in their dreams. The sacrifices which have to be done is also mentioned by the spirit itself and it must be followed accordingly. The taboos which have to be observed after the rituals all are mentioned by the priest, the period of restriction differ according to the ritual performed, some last just for one day, some for days, months and some for a year also.

Divination

Before performing any kind of rituals by the priest, divination is a must. It is a kind of diagnosis process and with its help the priest knows the root cause of the problems and knows which spirit/*Uii* they must approach. The divination is also done for selecting right priest for a particular ritual and it can be done by any *Nyibu* or *Nyikok*. The name of several *Nyibus* is mentioned during the selection process and when he or she gets the name of right *Nyibu*, he or she can sense it and the name of the *Nyibu* is finalized and approached for the rituals. During the divination process, Donyi – the sun, is being referred to and her blessing is sought for. The divination may be done by the priest himself or herself or by the help of divination specialist priest. The divination is done in many ways such as by reading stone and rice grain called as *Lime/Iwmmv Kaanam*, while approaching for *Kime Kaanam* especially for women, it must be kept in mind that she must not be in the menstruation period, or else the priest would not perform the divination.² In rice divination process called *Ambin Kaanam*, the rice must be brought from the home of the person in whose house the rituals are to be performed. The other way of divination is called as *Ro-*

Koknam and *Pipi/Pww-Chinam*. In *Ro-Koknam*, the chicken liver is carefully examined, in this process a chick of about one month old is held by the priest by his hand and he recites incantations. After finishing his incantations, he cuts the chicken with a knife by the neck, then the liver of chicken is taken out and examined by the experts. The different fold, holes, lines and spots on the liver signify different causes of the diseases and accordingly necessary sacrifices are to be made. In other forms of divination done by liver is *Reksin/Kiikanam*, where the liver of a pig is studied by a priest. In *Piipe-chinam*, the local eggs are used after recitation by the priest holding the egg in his hand, the egg is put inside a *Pessum* – a small basket made of bamboo and is boiled in an unused utensil or a bamboo tube called *Pidu*.³ After the egg is done, its yolk or *Pimar/Pwmwr* is sucked by the assistant priest, the solid part which remains in the mouth is taken out, examined by the experts to identify the causes of sickness or any other problem. Even the cover of egg or egg-shell is also examined for the same purpose. The divination of eggs is done not only by the priest but the *Nyikoks* too can perform it.

Dreams

Dreams play a very important role in the Galo tradition. They give much importance to dreams and their interpretation. While in sleep, the soul or *Yaji/Yalo* of a man finds time to establish contact with the spiritual world. It is believed that the movement or activity of the soul in spiritual life is interpreted as a dream or *Yuma* in the physical life. The dreams foretell prosperity, sickness, health, crimes, and misfortunes. The priests are also guided by their dreams. The dream about burning fire indicates sunny weather. If one dreams about the sunset, it indicated the death of near ones such as mother or father. The crossing of clear river or climbing mountains indicates success but crossing of muddy or unclear river indicates misfortunes. The dreams about catching small fish indicates money but catching big fish indicates misfortunes or bad luck and if you get bitten in your dreams by a snake it indicated sickness or body pain etc. But the efficacy of a dream depends upon the time when it is dreamt. Like the dreams during morning hours are of great importance. Dreams, thus play a very important aspect in the Galo society. They believe that the dreams foretell about the coming events and thus they do divination and sacrifices accordingly to prevent forthcoming misfortunes.⁴

Functions of *Nyibu*

The functions of *nyibus* are not only confined towards the ritual practices alone, but they also perform as a physician as well as ultimate decision maker in the time of disputes in the *keba* where the village counsel fail to bring out results.⁵ While performing the rituals the *nyibus* recognize both malevolent as well as benevolent spirits. He is believed to be led by a spirit along the right direction and it guides him against any un-necessary sacrifices for curing. In course of invoking and praying the spirit, it is believed that *nyibus* are guided by some spiritual attendants known as the *donyi-lulu* or *talo-tanya*. It is to please these spirits; the rituals are held and sacrifices are made.

1. Construction of House.

According to Galo folk tales, Abotani the forefather of the community, learned the art of building bamboo house by the guidance of the spirit. *Pado-pae, em, korbin-kora em, kiliando em, hiri em, siruk-mosen*, which means cutting down of trees, shrubs, climbers, shrubs for cultivation and construction purposes.⁶ He was blessed by the spirit *donyi-jilo, yirku-yirte* and *talo-tanya* to construct house from *oso* (cane) *akap* (roofing material) which generally consist of *taek* (toko leaf), *tare/tarv* (cane leaf) or *luru* (banana leaf),

gilo/gia (the main posts) which generally consists of *korbin, kora, yaik, enchi, pulo* (name of tree used for house building).

There are two important rituals performed by the *nyibu*, before the construction and after it. Even in the case of shifting from one site to another, *nyibu* has to first establish a *dere/deerv* where he performs a ritual called *diko modi gene*. After these a bamboo is planted on the site, if it grows into a healthy plant, the site is acknowledged for shifting into new area in the case of house, instead or bamboo rice grains are buried in pairs and kept overnight. Next day the buried rice grains are checked. If the rice is missing from the sites, then, the site is rejected. Looking into the omen, if it is favourable *nyibu* performs *pipi chinam*. Once the house is completed a last ritual call *sotu-sobe/sotu-sobv* is performed. Such act of selection and purification can is only done by the *nyibu*.⁷

2. Death rituals.

The Galo community classify death into four different categories, on the basis of nature of death. Based on it, different death rituals are performed by the priest. These four categories are, for a still-born child is called *jaknam*; a cradle death is known as *yapchi hinam*; unnatural death due to accidents and sickness is called *tale hinam*; the last natural death is called *yanu hinam*. In the case of first and second category of death, *nyibu* performs *nyipo uii*. This spirit is considered to be so bad that even the priest sometimes dose not wish to perform but with social obligations he is compelled to do it. The food for priest is not prepared in the house, h has to maintain certain restriction in his diet. Int eh third category of death, its ritual is called as *gaapu riinam*, this is performed to drive away the soul of the dead. It is done for five days from burial. It is observed to clean the house of misfortune. The fourth category of death, the dead is fed for five days after the normal burial and a stair is replaced. Once all the rituals are done, house is cleanse by the *nyibu* and the entire family goes to the river to purify themselves.⁸

3. Marriage

It is one of the most awaited and auspicious event for the people, along with many other festivals and ceremonies.in the presence of *nyibu* and elders, new couple is declared as husband and wife after *nyame laayap* performed by *nyibu*. Here, the good will and fortune spirits are invoked by the priest for successful marriage. While its performance he sticks chicken feather in the hair of the couple as a blessing of *ai-agam*. From that day onwards the bride is recognised as the member of the groom's family by the spirit and the society. Apart from this ceremony, there are other rituals which is optional, depending on the desire of the families.

4. Economic activities

Pomjar benam: this ritual is performed by the *nyibu* when he or she is about to embark on a journey. It is done for the safety and wishing good fortune for their journey.⁹

Surun benam: this is performed after the harvesting seasons. Here the spirit of fortune is appeasing in order to multiply the production.¹⁰

Yebu chenam: this is performed on request of hunters before leaving for their gaming expedition. ¹¹

Ngochep chepnam: this is performed before the community leaves for fishing. ¹²

5. Festivals

Mopin is a sacred festival celebrated by the Galos, during the month of April (*luki*). *Mopin* is regarded as goddess of wealth and prosperity and it also carries positive message of harmonious existence on earth. During the time of *mopin*, priest get engaged in vigorous rituals, chanting with his assistant priest called *buo*. They chant for two nights requesting the spirits to bless the people for prosperity, peace, fertility and good harvest. *Pinku-pirte, dimir pinku- dimir pinte* and *mirama pinku- miram pinte*, are the spirits who

accompany the goddess Mopin. Bamboo alters are made for these deities, where ritual sacrifices are made of Mithun, *opo*, *iti* (rice powder), *take* (ginger). Apart from *Mopin Nyibu*, *Popiir Nyibu* chants ballads related to Mopin Goddess and performs dance called *popir poknam*. 13

6. War

The warfare among in the Galo in ancient times had its basis on the social system and economy's needs. These were done to avenge the death of clansmen, economic gain due to raids during the war, trespassing into territory, trade dispute and attacks and counter attack. Before conducting war or raids, they used to perform a ritual called *kame* by *nyibu*, for which the raiding party need to observe some taboo for five days and a fowl was offered to appease the spirit in their favour. After the war, purification ritual *gaapa* was performed. For these specific ritual *nyibu* was selected by divination process.

7. Epidemic

During the times of epidemic, a ritual was performed by *nyibu* called, *yulu uii*. 14 It is a community ritual where every household of a village must take part. After it, a taboo is observed for two to five days depending on the severity of cause. The entry of any other is closed and no one is even allowed to move out of the village.

Conclusion

The *Nyibus* of Galo community still practise their traditional way of living, despite their different occupation and source of livelihood, they carry out the social responsibility of a priest. With the continues wave of change, people often fails to appreciate the age old traditional knowledge of priest and acknowledge their contribution to the society. There are many factors to these changes, such as education, different ideologies of religious clashes, medical science and modern thought and way of living. But nothing is lost yet, attempts are been made with regional initiatives to promote and document traditional knowledge system.

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