INDIGENOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES AMONG THE GALOS OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH
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ABSTRACT This fieldwork-based article provides an ethnographic overview of surviving traditional ritual practices and underlying belief systems among the Galos of Arunachal Pradesh. Since most of this community recently converted to Christianity, many of the details outlined here may soon be forgotten and no longer practised, or will be only used when other patterns of recourse to remedies for distress have shown no results. The evidence presented indicates the continued presence of ancient holistic worldviews that may be dismissed by others as ‘primitive’ but whose followers seek to fall in line and clearly connect themselves with locally grounded forces beyond immediate human control.

KEYWORDS: Arunachal Pradesh, Galos, India, local culture, Nature, religion, rituals, tribal cultures

Introduction
Among diverse ethnic tribes of northeastern India, particularly in Arunachal Pradesh, the Galo tribe is one of the major communities, scattered in almost every part of Arunachal Pradesh today.1 Almost one-third of this Tibeto-Mongoloid group inhabits mainly the three districts of East Siang, West Siang and Upper Subansiri in Arunachal Pradesh which are their home districts. Traditionally, the Galo people are animistic in nature and consider Nature/nature to be the ultimate power. They have maintained their own ‘customary’ system of indigenous beliefs and practices since time immemorial, but it is now falling into oblivion mainly because many Galos have recently become Christians. In fact, these indigenous beliefs and practices were for long not even acknowledged as a form of religion. However, as a result of the indigenous movement in the recent past, which may today be seen as evidence of a reaction to globalisation, and thus as a manifestation of glocalisation, these have been recognised as indigenous religious practices and are considered as part of Galo religious as well as cultural identity (see earlier Elwin, 1959a; Führer-Haimendorf, 1976 [1939]). Such beliefs and practices
of the Tani tribes including Galos have resulted in the emergence of an indigenous form of religion popularly known as Donyi-Poloism. This evolves from Donyi (Sun) and Polo (Moon), as these two celestial entities are considered as their gods and all supreme powers are believed to lie with the almighty Donyi and Polo. On the status of Donyi–Polo in the lives of the Galo, Verrier Elwin (1959b: 211) remarked:

He reigns unchallenged in the heavens; he is the eye of the world; he is as important to man as the eye is to the body. He watches everything; he is the witness of truth; he shows the way to go; he protects them, he treats them with mercy. Above all, he is the Lord of truth and an oath taken on his name is the most binding of all.

In fact, over time, some changes in these age-old beliefs and practices are noticeable specifically among urban and educated people, but the life systems of many members of the tribe are still today guided by those beliefs and practices, although outside influences of Hinduism, Christianity and Islam can also be perceived. The present article presents some ethnographic insights into the current operation of this traditional belief system and the resulting social and ritual actions, which clearly form a holistic system of beliefs and practices of continued relevance.

The Galo and Their Indigenous Beliefs, Practices and Rituals

To Galos, every creature on earth is a creation of supernatural powers which take care of them. Everything found in the forests and rivers is owned by certain deities or spirits. All incidents, either natural or unnatural, are believed to be the work of some unseen powers and a person's every action is being watched by them. Centuries of interaction with the ecosystem and the environment helped the tribe to evolve and acquire a way of life for their sustenance adjusted to nature. All their activities, such as farming, hunting, fishing, rituals and festivals, are still carried out in accordance with these belief systems. They also believe that the suffering of human beings is the reflection of some deities' displeasure towards that person or his family. Natural hazards, such as floods, landslides, epidemics or crop failures, are interpreted as signs of the wrath of some deities for not offering due ritual sacrifices or indicate misconduct done by certain people.

In view of these beliefs, traditional Galos perform certain rituals by examining chicken or pig liver or tasting the yolk of boiled eggs before taking up any major activity related to the forest or rivers. This is a form of seeking permission from the spirits of the forest in which traditional knowledge is crucial. If the result of the examination is favourable, the work is carried out. There are many animals and birds in the forest whose killing is prohibited. Likewise, they do not ransack the forest unnecessarily. They do not use any abusive or insulting words for any wild animals especially during hunting and fishing. Making hue and cry, or throwing stones into the deep jungles, is not permitted due to the belief that it would disturb and enrage the deities of the jungle (Riba, 2003: 89–90).
All such beliefs are reflected in various ritual actions performed on diverse occasions. Performance of these rituals is believed to guard against the influences exercised by these spirits. Hence, to counter evil influences, Galos perform inhibitory rituals. Conversely, to perpetuate good influences, they perform propitious rituals. Most of these major rituals, as outlined below, follow a coherent pattern and many of them relate to different kinds of taboo. *Ari Rinam* in Galo dialect may be explained as obeying the taboos mandated by a priest with regard to a certain ritual performed. It is believed that when a ritual is performed at home, all taboos imposed by the priest (*Nyibo*) upon the family members, especially the sick person or the person(s) for whom the ritual was performed (*Nyich*), ought to be followed at least for five days by other family members and ideally for 30 days by the *Nyich*. These taboos are being followed to maintain the sanctity of the hymns that have been chanted by the *Nyibo* with full vigour and spiritual fervour during the ritualistic performance. The main objective of conducting such ritualistic performances is the early recovery of the ailing person as well as peace and prosperity of the family members. Hence, all taboos and restrictions imposed by the priest are to be obeyed by them as far as possible to avoid bad luck, sickness, an epidemic or anger of the spirits. In fact, all such taboos and restrictions are not similar in all cases of rituals; they evidently vary from ritual to ritual, differ from disease to disease and are often protective rituals that seek to ward off lurking dangers.

In general, Galos observe three types of taboos after the performance of ritual ceremonies. The taboo on movement starts with the completion of the ritual and after the departure of the *Nyibo* from the house of the *Nyich*. The *Nyich* and all members of the family keep themselves confined indoors. As noted, the period of confinement varies from ritual to ritual. For example, 5–10 days of taboo on movement will nowadays be observed after the sacrifice of a *mithun* (*Hobe-Panam*) by both bride and groom. Similarly, the *Nyich* also observes a taboo on movement for certain days depending on the kind of protective Peka Panam rituals performed. But only one day of taboo is observed after the Agam-Layap, a rite to call back the wandering soul.

The taboo on certain works or activities is imposed after a certain rite has been carried out. Basically, restrictions are imposed on movement itself, on the felling of big trees, the cutting of banana trees, digging of holes, damming of rivers and so forth. The third kind of taboo is on eating. The *Nyich* and other members of the family who performed a ritual do not take any meal from the utensils of others for certain days or months. They also observe taboos on eating some fruits, such as bananas, oranges or jackfruits, and some green leafy vegetables, such as spinach (*giyi*), round pepper (*raar*) or prickly ash (*onyor*). A man who kills a tiger and then performs a ritual does not take ginger and rice powder (*ite*) for the rest of his life. Similarly, a person bitten by a snake performs a ritual and then does not take certain tabooed items after that.

All these taboos and restrictions depend on the nature of rituals and hence vary from situation to situation. In many cases, it is seen that with the performance of a minor ritual (*tajir benam*) after a lapse of five days of the main ritual, many taboos are lifted or leniency is granted by the priest to the sick person as well as to other
family members. Disobedience to such taboos is believed to invite wrath in the form of accidents, such as injury, fracture of hands and legs, or premature whitening of hair. Many people, it is believed, have faced misfortune and/or deformities for disobeying the tradition of observing such taboos.

*Jidir Lanam* means the victimisation of a man who becomes a lunatic and turns deaf after cutting down a ‘ghost tree’. Such trees, according to the Galos, are dwelling places of ghosts popularly known as *Yapom-Yaji*. These *Yapom-Yajis* are angered when a person cuts the branches of a ghost tree, damages its shape or fires at such trees. The person responsible for such acts becomes sick after some time. Trees which are believed to be the abode of ghosts are mainly the banyan tree (hirek) and a wild banana tree (kopo-kole). It is generally believed that individuals who ignore such beliefs and damage such trees intentionally or fearlessly will face the wrath of the *Yapom-Yaji*. In case of such intentional damage caused to these ghost trees, the destroyer cannot escape from illness or physical harm unless a timely ritual to pacify these ghosts is more or less immediately performed by a priest. Generally, these ghost trees are found in deep and dense forests away from the villages. According to a myth, when Abo Tani was declared the Master of Earth by Ane Mopin (Mother Mopin) after he defeated *Yapom-Yaji* in a fire competition, *Yapom-Yaji* requested Abo Tani not to destroy their *Hirek* and *Kopo-Kole* trees and their plea was agreed with. Therefore, until today, Galos seek to abstain from destroying these special ghost trees. However, in situations where destruction is unavoidable, it is only done after duly performing a ritual known as *Digo* to pacify and compensate *Yapom-Yaji*. There are many surviving victims who have been subjected to different types of punishments for destroying ghost trees. One of these is *Yapom Jonam*, various forms of abduction or disappearance, as elaborated further below.

Other important rituals relate to childbirth. The literal meaning of the term *Aki Chatum Nam* is ‘delivery obstruction caused to a pregnant woman who is under labour pain’. It is widely believed that when the brothers and sisters of a pregnant girl come to her house during the time of labour pain, this delays her delivery. It is believed that in such a situation, brothers and sisters should leave the house of their pregnant sister immediately so that the pain may not be prolonged. While *Aki Chatum* affects the normal delivery of a woman, it excludes cases which need medical support.

In other words, these Galo beliefs and practices are not a hermetically sealed system. *Lene Dektup Nam* relates to general explanations for misfortune. Galos believe that it is an indication of ill omen or an indication of loss, failure of future plans and assignments if one’s big toe gets struck with a stone or wood while moving out from the house to do some important work. Parents always advise their children to be careful while going out to perform certain works so that their work or plan could be accomplished. Other beliefs relate to good or bad luck in economic terms. *Laktam* means palm and *Laktam Ak Nam* means an itching in the palm which either signifies one’s loss or profit. Among Galos, it is a common belief that when the right hand palm itches, this is considered as a natural indication of expenditure or monetary loss. But when there is an itching in the left hand palm, this indicates getting benefit and monetary gain.
**Ghosts and Spirits: Yapom Jonam**

The literal meaning of the words Yapom Jonam is the abduction of human beings by an evil spirit (yapom). Many factual incidents of this have been reported from various Galo areas, such as Seren, Koyu, Likabali, Gensi and Dari. In all these places, people have been abducted by evil spirits or wicked fairies commonly known as Yapom. In this contemporary age, some people hardly believe such incidents, but for many it remains a fact that under the influence of Yapom, particularly during the night, a man may be abducted from his house by these wicked fairies and within no time the victim is imprisoned by them in a distant forest, crossing various mountains and rivers. Most of the victims were abducted while hunting or working at slash-and-burn (jhum) fields in the forest. Many of these victims were recovered alive after a long search, but some of them were found dead. The safe return of the abducted person is believed to depend on rituals performed and sacrifices offered to Yapom by the priest without any delay. To perform the ritual, the priest takes a hen from the hatchery, moving towards the forest accompanied by his assistant. Before entering the forest, the priest, while chanting hymns, plucks some feathers of the live hen and blows them in the air to locate the direction and whereabouts of the abducted person. Thereafter, he fixes some of the feathers on the tip of arrows and shoots them towards the dense forest along with ritual chants assuring the Yapom that any demands will be fulfilled. It is believed that through such appeasement and the shooting of arrows to obstruct their roads, the Yapom may yield and do not take the victim further and send him back safely to his original place. But in many cases, it is found that they cannot be persuaded easily and keep the abducted persons in their captivity for more than 3–4 months. In such critical circumstances, the priest and village folks gear up to initiate a war-like situation against the Yapom. The priest and his assistant, while chanting hymns, blow feathers and shoots arrows not only in different directions but also towards banyan trees, wild banana trees and various climbing plants. Some people accompanying the priest and his assistants clear the bushes and trees on the way using their swords. Slowly and silently other groups of villagers formed for the purpose follow the priest and his group and together they surround the whole area of the forest from different directions and compel the spirits to accept their offers and release the captive from their clutches.

It is believed that Yapom usually abducts people who had created disturbances in their dwelling places or intruded in habitations by clearing the forest or felling trees in the dense forest, particularly the special Hirek tree and Kopo-Kole tree, as discussed earlier, without paying any compensation in return. Further, it is believed that Yapom blessed many human beings with different domestic animals and agricultural produce and would expect people to give a due share to them in return. They give different signs and indications to people in this regard. Those who ignore them continuously have to face their wrath in the form of abduction or fighting in the forest.

To secure release of the abducted person, a proper ritual needs to be performed which is again ascertained through chicken egg or liver examination. The ritual, as noted above, is carried out assuring the spirits of compensation in the form of sacrifices.
If the Yapom is satisfied with the sacrifices or with the assurances for compensation, then the person is released safe under all circumstances, or else his corpse may be found. Sometimes, the abducted person is lost forever. Proper conduct of required rituals and sacrifices of hens, cock, dog or pig and, above all, proper chanting of hymns by the priest appealing to the Yapom are all combined to bring about the safe release of an abducted person from the custody of Yapom.

Funeral Rites and Witchcraft Rituals

The literal meaning of the terms Urom/Orom in Galo means the presence of an immortal spiritual element in the human soul, manifested in two different forms. First, it is believed that when someone dies, she/he is to be bid farewell properly. This is done to please the departed soul so that the soul may live happily in the other world. This kind of funeral rite can be performed just on the burial day and may also be performed on the first death anniversary of the dead person by sacrificing a mithun, cow or pig with valedictions to the departed soul. Such funeral rite is known as Orom-monam and is done to appease the soul of the deceased. When it is performed, Orom may not cause any distress. Besides, it is done to send the soul of the dead person with honour, so that Orom’s spirit may be satisfied with it. If such rites are not performed at all or are not properly executed, then Orom may come back and create an uncongenial atmosphere at home in the form of ill-health, loss and poverty. In order to appease the soul of the dead, a further ritual known as Orom Gunam is performed, which involves sacrificing a lot of livestock to fulfil the desire of Orom (Doke, 2001: 40–1).

A further prominent ritual is called Romle Lanam in Galo and relates to Romle as embodying special powers of sorcery or witchcraft. Romle Lanam creates severe body pain of a unique kind caused by the evil spirit of a living person. It is quite peculiar and difficult to understand. However, it is widely believed by the tribe that the evil spirit of a living person comes to one’s body and soul, thereby causing distress. It is said that Romle attacks those who are weak by heart, but it is important to mention that the person who is causing Romle may not even know that his or her spirit has attacked someone else. As that person is innocent in this regard, no customary laws or legal action can be enforced to punish the person responsible for causing Romle (Doke, 2001: 42). When someone is believed to come under the influence and attack of Romle, a proper ritual has to be performed with the help of a priest (Nyibo) and sacrifices have to be made with a cow, pig, dog, foul or hen to get rid of Romle.

One of this ritual’s peculiarities is that no modern medical treatment appears to be effective to cure the symptoms. Some people believe that it is hereditary for a few clans to be endowed with Romle. As such, people avoid eating and accepting from such special people edible items, such as ginger, rice powder (ite), rice beer (poka) or chicken (porok adin). This power of Romle is believed to spread with those items and those people will pass on their powers. Such inheritance is known as Nyognam in Galo.
Togu Deities, Marriage Rituals and Bravery

Togu Panam is an important kind of ritualistic activity also involving mithun sacrifice. It is performed during marriage ceremonies and is said to originate from Ijo Kaago, a high society credited as the first group to organise this ritual. It is basically performed to appease the Togu deity and many phases are involved in its performance. Togu belongs to the Mopin group of deities. The deity is invoked one day prior to the bride’s arrival at the groom’s house. Sacrifice of mithuns occurs on the marriage day (Nyida Alo). Before the sacrifice of mithuns, a structure made from four big bamboos on the roof of the house, known as Lobo Tunam, is erected and the priest performs Ite Garnam, chanting and mingling of rice powder for the Togu deity. In the early morning of the next day, all youths present at the ceremony go to the jungle and collect wooden posts and the priest starts chanting hymns called Ano Nenam to contact the Togu deity (Bagra, 2011: 37).

Peka is the god of bravery and Peka Panam is a ritual for him. It is said that when Abo Tani went to him after reincarnation, he bestowed Abo Tani with the power of bravery and courage and also offered him swords and spears to protect himself from evil spirits and natural calamities. During the celebration of Peka Panam, animals are sacrificed in large numbers and offered to Peka deities, such as Kale-Bote and Kate. It is celebrated for blessings and assistance to drive out evil spirits from the home as well as to gain courage and bravery in undertaking difficult work. The priest chants the hymns standing in front of a kind of altar along with three other assistants called bo, who chant the same hymns following the priest. Peka Panam is also performed by a hunter to appease the deity after killing wild animals of the forest (Bagra, 2011: 37).

Annual Fertility Rituals

Mopin festival, officially celebrated on 5 April every year, is the most significant Galo festival and concerns the goddess Mopin. According to myth, Mopin Ane was pleased to hand over all gifts and boons to Abo Tani for good crops and prosperity and since that time agricultural activities began. The priest chants Mopin lore and initiates Yidum Nam, who performs the sacrifice, preferably of mithuns, or pigs and hens for appeasement, while chanting hymns for good health, peace and prosperity of all. It is a fertility festival in which the eternal sisters are invoked to shower their blessings for a rich agricultural harvest. It is believed that after such invocation, the Mopin goddess employs her daughters Pinku and Pinte to take a rich harvest to the land of human beings that would ensure peace, prosperity and happiness. During the celebrations, people put on pure white traditional attires which are symbols of peace and purity, and they dance Popir, a type of Mopin dance, to the tune of the Popir song. People then dine and drink together and make merriment (Padu, 2010: 20).

Mod Panam resembles Mopin and also relates to the Mopin group of deities. Mod is regarded as the goddess of agriculture and this particular ritual is specifically
performed for peace, prosperity and better agriculture. The ways of performing this ritual and the mode of celebrations resemble the Mopin celebration. However, Mod Panam is performed outside the settlement in agricultural fields, whereas Mopin festival is celebrated in the village itself and in other public places. According to myths, once gods and goddesses assembled in Heaven (Loku Lote Bedum). From there, they started migrating in search of permanent dwellings. Their offspring also migrated from there according to their choices. Mod was the eldest among the offspring of Mopin and she migrated wearing a well-decorated dress, known as Lodo-Lorek Gare-Gapo garments. Mod followed the Erak-Komrak migration route which is believed to be an imaginary track and settled in a place with many boons. Since then she is the goddess of good harvest. Galos perform Mod by taking the name of Anyi Pinku-Pinte, the goddess of boons.14

Mari festival, one of the important festivals of the tribe, is another variant of Mopin festival. There is not much difference in the elements and function of Mopin and Mari, and the objective of the Mari festival, too, is principally to secure surplus harvest, health and prosperity of mankind. The Mari festival lasts for three days and is normally celebrated every year in February. Etymologically, the term Mari is derived from Mari-Menpak, which means ‘the gathering of erudite people and sharing of wisdom’ or ‘communal worship’. In other words, the Mari festival is a time of assembling and bringing together human worshippers and spirits, the latter both malevolent and benevolent. The objective of assembling of worshippers and spirits is to make an agreement between them at the worship object (Dipi) through the act of sacrificing animals. Such agreement is for abundant crops, protection from incursions, prevention of epidemics, avoidance of bad luck and securing general well-being of the villagers for which they sacrifice animals and offer prayers. Unlike in Mopin festival, in the Mari festival generally pigs and fowl are offered as sacrifices to invoke the spirits. Like in the Mopin festival, during the Mari festival, Galos smear rice powder in each other’s face and Popir dance is performed enthusiastically. Apart from these actions, house-to-house visits by Nyibo, Bo and Popir dance troupes with different ballads is a common feature of the Mari festival. Although there is no separate tutelage for Mari to be venerated in the community, Galos have observed the Mari festival since time immemorial in the belief that it would bring bumper harvest, prosperity and welfare of the people in the village. But the Mari festival is not much known to Galos residing at other places of Arunachal Pradesh. It is today found to be known and celebrated in the Seren, Nari and Koyu circles of East Siang District, and in the Likabali and Gensi circles of West Siang District.15

Traditionally, in villages the final authority to decide whether to celebrate Mopin festival or Mari festival rests with the Nyibo. After examining chicken liver or through divination of eggs he confirms whether it is Mopin festival or Mari festival that villagers ought to celebrate during that year. There is easier availability of priests and there are fewer expenses involved in the celebration of the Mari festival compared to the Mopin festival. Hence, many Galo villages prefer to celebrate Mari in place of Mopin.
The term *Pintum* is derived from Mopin itself, but the nature of this function is different from Mopin festival, while the origin and nature of *Pintum* and Mopin are similar. The basic distinction between *Pintum* and Mopin festival is that Mopin festival is celebrated by performing rituals on a collective or community basis and is hence commonly known as a ‘communal festival’. *Pintum* comprises the same ritual elements, but it is hosted and organised by a single family according to instructions given by the priest in trance while performing *nyigre*. This *nyigre* is a ritual act which a priest performs at the request of a family to ascertain prevalent problems afflicting the family and to trace a remedy. Thus, *nyigre nyibo* themselves decide whether it is expedient on the part of the family to perform *Pintum* or not. Galos deeply believe that when a family performs *Pintum* according to the ritualistic requirements of Mopin, the boon asked for will be bestowed on the family for a bumper harvest, good health as well as all-round prosperity. *Pintum* ceremonies usually take three days. The elements of worshipping *Pintum* are the same as in Mopin celebrations. The success of *Pintum* also depends on strict compliance with the taboos prescribed by the priest after the completion of the ceremony. Three types of taboos are generally prescribed, for the person for whom the *Pintum* was observed, for all members of the family and for the villagers as a whole. Nowadays, however, observation of *Pintum* is rarely found among the Galos and the reasons for this may be manifold.¹⁶

**Beliefs Relating to the Soul and the Purpose of Sacrifices**

The Galos believe that everybody has a soul, called *yalo*. This soul may wander about as in dreams or may be dragged away by a spirit (*uyu*). The priest alone can coax an evil spirit to release it. After the sacrifice of animals and birds in front of images of the *uyus*, the Galo priest takes some beads tied with a string in his hand and prays to the spirits to release the *yalo* of a sick man. This prayer, known as *yalo lanam*, is conducted since it is believed that if spirits are satisfied with the sacrifices, the *yalo* is released, comes into the beads and rests on them. They are then tied to the neck of the sick person. Through this process the soul is believed to be linked with that person. If a man is sick and his soul is believed to be wandering around, some rites for calling back the soul, such as *jirga-yeper*, *turbo senam* or *agam-*layap are performed by the Galo priest.

Galos do not believe in rebirth and their popular belief is that if a person invokes Donyi and other benevolent gods and goddesses regularly in his or her lifetime, the soul will reach them unfettered by spirits (*uyus*). It is known from myths that in bygone days, benevolent gods used to resurrect persons from their graves. It is said that when Abo Tani was killed and devoured by Taki, Jiku-Miku (a son of Donyi) resurrected him (Nyori, 1998: 18).

Animal sacrifice is conducted during ritual ceremonies to propitiate the spirits responsible for the diseases of people. The type of disease, the spirit responsible for that disease and the sacrifices required are generally first ascertained through divination performed by the priest. Sacrifices are to be made strictly according to the revelations
made in the divination. Common sacrificial animals include *mithuns*, cows, pigs, goats and dogs. Since animals play an important role in the lives of the tribe, Galos perform different rites and rituals by sacrificing different animals for various purposes.

The first purpose would be to perform a ritual to free a person from pain, misery and sorrow caused by malevolent spirits. Incantations in some animal sacrifices are pronounced to appease the malevolent spirits to cure the ailing person. The spirits are basically asked to leave the patient and to take an animal in his/her place. Second, in general, *mithun* sacrifice (*Hob Panam*) and other rituals in peaceful times (*Apo Uyu*), animals are offered to Donyi, Tonyi-Togu, ancestors and others, so that the soul of the person concerned may reach them and live in their safe custody. In such rituals, benevolent deities, such as Agam, Hitum-Jore and Ite-Bote, are worshipped and animals are sacrificed to bring material prosperity and good health to the sick person. In the Peka *Panam* ceremony, animals are sacrificed for Kale and Bote-Kate, the gods of bravery and war, and others for their blessings and assistance, courage and bravery in any difficult circumstances.

Third, sacrificial rituals are performed to avenge a wrong done or to retaliate and obtain supernatural power for this purpose. The *Erap Tênam* ritual is one such ritual. In some areas such ritual is considered part of sorcery and witchcraft. Lastly, it is generally believed that animal sacrifice plays an important role, which is different from the ordinary propitiatory rite. It is believed that after death, the soul of a person goes to the next world where he/she enjoys the same status as during his/her mortal existence. There she/he gets back all properties acquired including the souls of all animals sacrificed during the lifetime in this world (Nyori, 1998: 16).

**The Continued Relevance of these Beliefs and Practices**

All these beliefs and practices resulting in different forms of rites, rituals and sacrifices are still to some extent maintained and continued by the tribe today and constitute their indigenous faith and religion. Moreover, in terms of ethnic identity, the tribe believes that they have directly originated from Jimi Ane, who later on created Donyi–Polo to make all proper arrangements for better existence of human beings, animals, birds and plants on earth. Hence, the combined divine figures of Donyi and Polo have been accepted as gods by the tribe.

According to Galo myths, Jimi, the creator, after completing the task of creation remains silent, indeed Jimi in the Galo language means ‘silence’. But Donyi and Polo remain connected with human beings physically as well as spiritually. As such, people commonly regard Donyi–Polo as the highest divine figure. In fact, Galos worship Donyi on several grounds. Donyi is the controller of the fate of men and giver of a wife (*Donyi Mumsi*) to Tani. Donyi also saved Tani when Taki cheated and murdered Tani by engaging Jiku-Miku to resurrect him. When Tani was revived Donyi was assured to give sunshine, energy, favourable weather and animals for domestication.
Donyi is known under different names and characters in different spheres of Galo society. In the poetic language of priests (Nyibo-Agom), Donyi is called Mother Iji (Iji Ane). She can manifest herself in different ways and all members of her family help her in various activities in different fields. Donyi Jiku-Karku is said to have presided over the sessions in heaven (Kargu-Kardi) and takes decisions on the fates of human beings and animals with the help of Yirku and Siri-Molo. Chiko Jiku-Jite keeps the records of the deeds of men and women and regulates the life and death of human beings. Jiru reigns over the kingdom of the dead and controls men of bad character. Jilen-Jiba and Jinyo-Jinyak look after various other spheres of the universe. While performing rituals, Galos make some images of these deities and offer different sacrifices to Donyi.

Together with these, as we saw, there are a number of benevolent and malevolent deities and spirits under Jimi and Donyi–Polo. Galos believe that the same deity may act as both benevolent and malevolent, but a malevolent force may turn into a benevolent one when it is properly propitiated and offered timely sacrifices. According to one of the myths, many of the spirits (uyus) are descendants of Taki, Tani’s cruel brother who took away Tani’s supernatural power (habro/chek) by cheating. Therefore, Taki and his descendants claim and hold supernatural power, they become spirits and can see man from anywhere, but cannot be seen by man. All these different deities or spiritual forces (uyus) are commanding different spheres of the earth, such as Yule-Uyu, the guardian deity of the east, Yury-Uyu of the west, Ahi or Kohi-Uyu of the north or upstream, and related to the south and the underworld are Mopin, Pinku-Pinte, Ampir, Pirlin-Ngurin, Chikojite, Nyiku and Jiku. There are also deities of the house, the village, neighbouring forests, water and the sky. House gods and goddesses are Agam, Hitum-Jore, Ite-Bote, Chute-Gamte, Bote-Bome, Igo-Gamgo, Doli-Doga, Chukur-Gamkur and Ikur-Bokur, while Yapom, Doje-Yapom, Pomte-Sarte, Bute-Kamdu, Karu-Kate and others are gods and goddesses of the neighbouring forests. Biru-Biyek, Jeru-Poru, Lipe-Pompe and Kiru-Ramro are the deities of water and Peka, Kate, Kale, Dote-Dori, Liru-Litum, Liru-Karu and many others are sky gods (Ete, 1984: 45).

The Roles of Galo Priests

In the various Galo dialects, a priest is called Nyibo and all kinds of religious rites and ceremonies of the Galo tribe are carried out by him. In fact, a priest is an envoy as well as the mouthpiece of the people on religious aspects of life just like the eminent orator (Nyikok) and Goan Buraths or Gam in sociopolitical aspects of life. He acts as a mediator and communicates with the spirits both benevolent and malevolent and appeals to the spirits for a remedy. As the intermediary between the spiritual world and the human world, he performs different types of divinations, offers sacrifices and invokes the blessings of spirits on behalf of the people. His position in society is very high and he is revered by all since he occupies himself in performing different rites and rituals for the well-being of the people, leaving aside most of his domestic work and personal responsibilities. As such, people extend their full cooperation to
a priest’s family in jhum cultivation and many other domestic chores. In addition, whenever animals are sacrificed in rituals or wild animals are hunted from the forest, the priest is given a major chunk of the meat, particularly the neck or thigh portion of animals. Nowadays, the high status of priests is diminishing gradually owing to the accessibility of medical science, development of education and to a great extent also conversion to Christianity by the majority of Galos.

A Galo priest is neither elected nor selected by the people. The position is not hereditary either. Generally, early proof of one’s innate qualities and talent or Donyi–Polo’s will regarding a person determines one’s real qualification to be eligible for the profession of a priest. One who shows special aptitude to foretell things and falls into trances in childhood becomes a Nyibo when he attains manhood. There are some Nyibos who are believed to have been ordained by the almighty Donyi–Polo, suddenly and without any childhood signs. Thus, Galo priests are basically born and are not made or trained, and they are always males.

Galo Nyibos can be categorised into two types. The first category is named as Gumin or Mumin Nyibo, and these priests are well conversant with all established norms and procedures required to execute the different religious rituals and invocations. They can also get into touch or communicate with spirits but without falling into trance. The second category is known as Nyigre Nyibo, the same term as used for the highest kind of ritual performed by Galos to ascertain the causes of any diseases or misfortunes when all other rituals have failed. A nyigre ritual is performed only at night and nobody is allowed to enter the house through the front stairs or the front door and may sit in the front corridor, until the nyigre ritual is completed, because these are exclusively kept for spirits and not human beings for that night. A Nyigre Nyibo falls into trance and becomes conversant with the different religious rites and chants. He comes under complete possession of both malevolent and benevolent spirits during the nyigre ritual. It is seen that the body of the Nyibo starts quivering, he scratches his body continuously and thereafter jumps and dances while chanting hymns. Being in this state of trance, he becomes unconscious and consumes things, such as ash, charcoal and chicken stool. Sometimes even his tone as well as his language also change. He communicates with the spirits and find out the causes and remedies for illness and misfortunes. Having found the causes, he suggests to the victims and their family to perform necessary rituals as remedial measures to pacify the spirits responsible for illness and misfortune (Nyori, 1998: 12).

Similarly, the assistant of a Nyibo, called Bo, is neither elected nor selected by the people, and it is not a heredity function or position either. Unlike a priest who shows special aptitude to foretell things and falls into trances in childhood or is ordained by Donyi–Polo, any elder can become an assistant priest, whose duty is only to assist generally and to repeat the chanting of hymns made by the priest during ritualistic acts or performances so as to boost his morale. Such support by the assistant(s) in religious rituals and ceremonies helps the priest in invoking the spirits for early arrival and prompt redress of any grievances. Apart from that most rituals require the repetition of hymns.
Some rituals do not need any Bo to repeat the words of incantation made by a Nyibo. Hence, the role and function of Bo is clearly optional and supplementary in nature.\(^\text{17}\)

The Galos and Their Neighbours

Unlike in the past, today the Galos are living in both urban and rural areas. Obviously, those living in rural areas, particularly in remote villages and settlements, have little interaction as well as chance of intermingling with other tribes of the state, and with the mainstream Hindus, Muslims and Christians because of their separate areas of settlements. But Galos living in urban areas are not only living with others but also intermingle with them and exchange different ideas among themselves and with others.

Thus, the influence of Hinduism is found in urban areas particularly in the Twin Capital towns and in other towns of the state, where the influence of Christianity is now alarmingly great, since 60–65 per cent of the Galo population have been converted to Christianity in recent years in both urban and rural areas. As of now, it is believed that there are no Galos who have been influenced by Islam, Buddhism or Sikhism, although some followers of those religions are also living around the Galos. In fact, there are many Galos who have faith in Hinduism as well as different denominations of Christianity, while most of them also still rely on oral traditions, belief systems and above all indigenous culture directly inherited from their ancestors as outlined here. There are a few individuals who are rather orthodox and have become religious fanatics, completely relegating their indigenous tribal identity to the background. It can be concluded, however, that the majority of Galo Christians and Hindus have retained some faith in their traditional belief systems and also follow most of the existing taboos as an inalienable part of their existence from time immemorial.

Conclusions

The present article aimed to provide ethnographic insider evidence of how Galos of Arunachal Pradesh today may execute various rituals and connect to their environment. Some important findings could be deduced from all these beliefs and practices of the Galos. Their belief systems and practices, whether we call them religious or secular, are maintained and largely continued till today because of the important roles played by Galo priests. Without priests, all such beliefs and practices and other oral traditions would have been lost forever and forgotten by the present generation. Most of the myths on which this community’s ritual actions are based go back to an elaborate mythology, particularly the myths associated with Abo Tani. These indigenous beliefs and practices of the Galos are not just ‘religious’ but are also associated with social ethics that unite the tribe, inculcate discipline and develop a sense of obedience among the people. They are thus secular as well as religious.

In modern language, this is evidence of a holistic pattern of thoughts and connected actions that distinguish this community from others as a manifestation and embodiment
of the unique identity of the Galos as a tribe. Without such beliefs and practices, the Galos would not have retained their unique tribal identity and perceive themselves and be perceived as different from other tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. Many years ago, von Furer-Haimendorf (1976 [1939]: 261), observing the spread of Christianity and its influence on the social patterns of Nagaland, noted in his conclusions:

In Arunachal Pradesh there has so far been no introduction of any new religion or ideology, and for this reason, more than any other, an organic development of the traditional religion and way of thinking is more likely to take place. Obviously, not all old customs will remain to be practised, but there will certainly be no sudden break and abandonment of inherited values.

That most of these indigenous belief systems and practices may gradually lose their primordial significance and knowledge of related practices in the near future also in Arunachal Pradesh today is already observable, particularly in view of the rapid conversion to Christianity taking place among Galos. The underlying holistic principles of the patterns described here, which further research might yet explain in more depth, are indeed in some form bound to remain part of the culture of local people in Arunachal Pradesh, especially those that live off agriculture and in close proximity to Nature. It is evident that what has been described and reported here is a form of ‘natural’ religion that seeks to connect people and their environment and often aims to explain disaster and strengthen individual capacities to handle the challenges of daily life. To what extent such challenges may be met by the various locally competing belief systems of more recent origin, rather than these ancient tribal forms, and to what extent new hybridities will develop, remains to be researched.

Notes

1. The Galos are officially recognised as a Scheduled Tribe in Arunachal Pradesh. For details on the customary laws of Arunachal Pradesh, see also Dutta and Duarah (1990: 43–4), with specific reference to the Galos as a sub-tribe or branch.
2. One of the peer reviewers pointed out that most interesting work could of course be carried out to ascertain how Christian belief patterns and rituals now impact on such traditional perceptions and actions. However, that is a task for the future.
3. On the *mithun* (*Bos frontalis*), see Simoons (1968).
4. There are many different names for them, such as *Kaaji, Kaapin, Kaate, Kaale* or *Kaarom*.
6. Interviews with Moba Doye, as note 5.
7. Interviews with Moba Doye, as note 5.
8. Interview with Miken Doye, 15 March 2014, in Dari village, West Siang District, Arunachal Pradesh.
10. Interview with Miken Doye, as note 8.
12. Interview with Miken Doye, as note 8.
13. Interviews with Moba Doye, as note 5.
14. Interview with Miken Doye, as note 8.
15. Interview with Miken Doye, as note 8.
17. Interviews with N. Koyu, as note 9.

References


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