



Understanding The Marriage System Of The Galo Tribe Of Arunachal Pradesh

Dr. MINBI KAYE

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR

DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

BINNI YANGA GOVERNMENT WOMEN'S COLLEGE, LEKHI

Abstract: Across societies, marriage is a revered sacrament, legally and socially acknowledged as a bond between a man and a woman. It remains grounded in the idea of eternal devotion between spouses. Galo tribe is one of the prominent tribes nestled across different districts of Arunachal Pradesh. In this article an attempt has been made to study the various types of wedding customs being practiced among the Galos. In Galo society, every person has the freedom to select their own life partner. Parents generally allow their children with significant independence in choosing whom to marry. The research paper uses both the primary and secondary sources that has been gathered through interviews, observations, and case studies conducted among the listed Galo communities spread across the state of Arunachal Pradesh.

Keywords: Marriage System, Customary laws, Child Marriage

I. INTRODUCTION

Marriage has long held profound importance in human history and culture, serving as both a legal recognition of the union between a man and a woman and a foundational pillar of society. Deeply rooted in human nature, marriage has been regulated by the state since ancient times, reflecting its societal significance. In India, however, there is no single legal framework for marriage. Instead, the system accommodates the diverse religious customs across the country, upholding the values of religious freedom. Before marrying, couples must comply with the matrimonial laws applicable to their faith or community. This dynamic and varied legal landscape mirrors India's rich cultural diversity, ensuring that traditions are preserved while respecting individual rights.

The Galo is among the predominant ethnic tribe in the district of West Siang, Leparada and Lower Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh. The tribe do not have a written history like most of the tribal people of the state. But they do possess a rich oral history in the forms of myths, legends and folk-tales which has been transmitted from one generation to another. This oral history acts as a source material to reconstruct their early history. They are mainly governed by their traditional ethos and the communities are basically organized around patriarchy. Hence, the women in these societies are nurtured on traditional values, beliefs and cultures which are intrinsically marked by male preponderance. A host of institutional, cultural, and legal constraints circumscribe women's involvement in socio-economic and political processes in this tribal society. The tribe is organised into various subgroups, with its own set of villages populated by members of the same clan, namely the *Karko*, *Karga*, *Karka*, *Tator-Tani*, *Bogum*, *Paktu*, and *Lodu*, which again have sub-groupings among them. Initially the name of Galo tribe was *Tapo*, which the neighbouring *Minyong* village named Galo, as stated by Husain (1995:73).

According to the Grierson's linguistic classification, the languages spoken among the Galos are put together under the north Assam group of the Tibeto-Burmese group. The main religion of the people in the district is a primitive and indigenous system of faith called *Donyi-Polo* and rests are mainly Christians and Hindus. The general features of the social culture stand on the basis of which the tribe exists are the presence of independent villages, a democratically constituted village council, an absence of chieftainship system, and a corporate life controlled by a code of customary law. Each village has a pattern of democracy in the form of a well-developed village council system known as *Keba*. It manages the day-to-day affairs of the village. It also regulates, formulates laws and issues order for the wellbeing of the community. Generally, the term *Keba* may also mean meeting, conference and discussion. It is constituted of influential people of the village who have good knowledge of the customs, cultures, values, traditions, customary laws and a person with a good oratory skill. They are known as *Keba Abo* in Galo dialect. In keeping with their traditions, disputes within the community are settled by a social council known as *Keba*. Their indigenous faith, *Donyi Polo*, venerates the Sun and Moon as supreme deities, reflecting their deep-rooted tribal heritage. They honour numerous deities, both benevolent and malevolent. The highest-ranking priest in their society is called the *Nyibu*. While both monogamous and polygamous marriages exist among the Galos, monogamy is far more common.

The Galos are originally farmers who rely solely on the production of rice and corn to fuel their economy. Rice is a staple in their diet, along with rice-based items like rice beer (*apong*) and rice cakes, often enriched with grains such as maize and millet. They gather ample amounts of wild greens. Their key festivals revolve around agricultural harvests. The Galos raises various animals, including cows, goats, Mithuns, pigs, cats, dogs, and poultry. A traditional myth among them explains the origins of animal domestication. The Galos are skilled at constructing durable houses, which require major repairs only once every six or seven years. Their homes are built using bamboo, strengthened with wood, and bound together with cane. Elevated on wooden stilts, the structures stand one to ten feet above the ground.

Customary laws are unwritten legal norms rooted in the traditions, practices, and beliefs of a community. They govern social conduct, dispute resolution, and resource distribution, often coexisting with formal legal systems. The Indian Constitution Safeguards Scheduled Tribes to ensure their cultural preservation and autonomous development. Legally, customary practices are not merely supplementary but form an essential part of the legal framework, coexisting with formal state-enacted laws. While statutory laws dominate the legal system, tribal customary laws though unwritten, remain binding within their communities, playing a crucial yet often overlooked role in maintaining tribal unity and identity.

This study highlights how tribal customary laws function not only as normative guidelines for governance among the Galos but also as instruments of social cohesion. A defining characteristic of these laws is their collective focus, rooted in the historical need to manage local ecosystems and natural resources. These traditions enabled self-sufficiency, primarily through *jhum* (shifting) agriculture, which sustained their food supply, while forests complemented their livelihood systems. The communal ownership of land and resources shaped their socio-economic structure, influencing their beliefs, rituals, and daily practices. Thus, land and forests are central to their tribal life, and their customary laws reflect this deep interconnection, ensuring both resource management and cultural continuity. Ultimately, these customary frameworks govern the social, cultural, and religious dimensions of community life, serving as comprehensive systems of normative control. And based on the customary laws, stand the marriage system of the tribe.

The Galo marriage institution is an intricate system comprising various rituals and practices. While its exact origins remain unknown, the tradition is believed to date back to *Abo Tani*, the legendary ancestor of the Galo people. According to etymology, the institution began with the first marriage of *Takar Taji* (a terrestrial being), where ten Mithuns were sacrificed, establishing a tradition that continues today based on hepatoscopy and divination performed by priests. Local ballads and ritual songs recount the agreement between *Anyi Kari Karnya* (sister) and *Achi Kara Karba* (brother), in which *Achi Kara Karba* assumed domestic responsibilities while *Anyi Kari Karnya* was expected to bear children. Additionally, many folk songs describe the marriage of *Abo Tani* to *Duyi Tami* (daughter of *Mopin*, the mother of prosperity).

The Galo practice clan exogamy, prohibiting marriages within the same clan. Violating this rule is considered incestuous, leading to social ostracism unless the offender performs elaborate rituals to atone. There is no fixed marriageable age among the Galo; instead, parents decide when their children, whether in infancy or early adulthood, should marry or be betrothed. The marriage ceremonies are conducted with the guidance of a *Nyibu* (priest), who performs divination and hepatoscopy to ensure compatibility and auspiciousness for the bride and groom.

II. The Bride Price (*Ari/Ome Ari*) in Galo Marriages

The Ari (bride price) is a fundamental component of Galo matrimonial customs, serving as compensation to the bride's family for the loss of her labour and support. This traditional practice applies to both arranged and abduction marriages (*Nyimen Sinam*). The standard bride price includes livestock like Mithuns (*Bos frontalis*), cows, and pigs symbolizing wealth, household goods including, bronze bowls, brass utensils, and traditional cloth and an additional gifts like Jewellery, beads, seeds, and clothing for the bride. The variation of gifts is often found among affluent families, as they may offer ten plus Mithuns, cows, and elaborate brassware. Whereas the lesser wealthy families might provide a single Mithun, pig, and basic utensils. The bride's family reciprocates with gifts to the groom's family, maintaining balance. The payment flexibility can be made as a lump sum or instalments, depending on the groom's economic capacity. The consequences of non-payment may risk marital discord and social stigma for the groom's family. The rationale behind the practice is to acknowledge the bride's value as both a familial and economic asset. It is seen that higher bride prices enhance the groom's family reputation. While it is still prevalent, monetization and legal reforms are gradually altering traditional Ari practices.

III. Forms of Marriages

Arranged Marriage Practices Among the Galo Tribe (*Nyida Tagaknam*)

Among the Galo tribe, marriages are traditionally arranged by parents through a process called *Nyida Tagaknam*. As noted by Nyori (1993:241), the groom's mother often plays a pivotal role in selecting the bride, preferring a match from her own parental family, clan, or village to strengthen kinship ties. The Process of Negotiated Marriage (*Nyida Tatnam*) starts with the Initiation of the Proposal, typically here, the groom's parents take the first step when they deem their son is ready for marriage. If they identify a suitable bride, they may subtly suggest her to their son through relatives or friends. Alternatively, if a young man expresses interest in a particular woman, his family initiates discussions with her parents. It is followed by the Family Negotiations & Omen Reading before formalizing the proposal, a *Nyibu* (priest) conducts divination by examining chicken or pig liver (*Porok Roksin Kanam* or *Ek Roksin Kanam*) to assess the marriage's auspiciousness. If the omens are favourable, the groom's family, accompanied by a mediator (*Lampo*), visits the bride's home with gifts (rice, beer, meat, fabric, and vegetables) to propose (*Nyida Tadnam*). Rejection is indicated if the bride's family refuses to accept the ceremonial shawl (*Tapum Ejji*). The stage is Finalization & Wedding Rituals, upon acceptance, the families set a wedding date, culminating in the *Nyida* ceremony. Unlike some tribal communities, the Galo do not practice elopement. Even in love marriages, parental consent is sought, though negotiations may proceed reluctantly if families initially disapprove.

Pre-Birth Betrothal (*Neppe Nyida*) Among the Galo Tribe

Historically, the Galo tribe practiced *Neppe Nyida* (child betrothal), where marriages were arranged for minors, sometimes even in infancy. The marriageable age ranged from early childhood to adolescence, with parents determining the appropriate time for the wedding ceremony. *Neppe Nyida* refers to a traditional Galo custom where two families arrange a marriage for their unborn children at the time of conception. This rare form of betrothal occurs primarily between close friends (*kens*) and serves as a binding social contract. As noted by Nyori (1993: 243–245), the agreement stipulates that if one family bears a daughter and the other a son, the children will marry when they come of age. When it comes to bride price arrangement, if a man cannot afford the customary bride price (*Tapum*) for his own marriage, he may negotiate a *Neppe Nyida* pact instead. In such cases, the other family agrees to pay the bride price on behalf of their unborn son, securing the right to marry the daughter when she reaches marriageable age. Once the agreement is made, the family of the unborn girl receives financial support for her eventual wedding. Breaking this pledge is socially discouraged, as it undermines trust between the *kens*.

This practice reinforces inter-family bonds and ensures economic reciprocity. *Neppe nyida* is uncommon and reserved for exceptionally close relationships, reflecting its role in maintaining deep social ties rather than being a widespread marital norm. Unlike the more common *Nyida Tagaknam* (arranged marriage), *Neppe Nyida* reflects a long-term commitment between families, transcending generations. While most Galo marriages are arranged post-birth, this pre-natal betrothal highlights the tribe's emphasis on kinship loyalty and economic cooperation.

While child betrothal was once common, contemporary Galo society has largely moved toward adult marriages based on mutual consent. Today, marriages between consenting adults are the prevailing social norm, reflecting broader changes in tribal customs and legal frameworks. In the past, parents held exclusive authority in arranging and solemnizing marriages, regardless of the children's age. Increased education, awareness, and legal prohibitions (e.g., India's Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006) have reduced the prevalence of underage unions. While remnants of the practice may persist in ceremonial forms, its functional role in marital

alliances has diminished. Adult marriages are now viewed as the standard, aligning with both tribal adaptability and national laws.

Exchange Marriage (*Nyime Lape Sinam*) Among the Galo

The Galo tribe practices *Nyime lape sinam*, a form of exchange marriage where two families arrange reciprocal unions—typically involving a brother-sister pair from each household. This system serves as a pragmatic solution to offset the economic burden of bride price (*Tapum*) payments. Family A gives a daughter to Family B in marriage, and in return, Family B provides a daughter to Family A. This "swap" ensures neither family bears the full cost of the bride price, maintaining economic equilibrium. Unlike pre-birth betrothal (*Neppe Nyida*), exchange marriages can occur regardless of age differences, prioritizing familial agreements over individual timelines. Avoids the financial strain of unilateral *Tapum* payments and strengthens bonds between families through mutual obligations.

While still practiced, *Nyime Lape Sinam* has declined due to increased monetization of the economy, reducing reliance on bride-price exchanges and because of influence of formal education and individualism. But the Legal discouragement of marriages without consent though exemptions still exist for tribal customs. Anthropologically if we see, the Exchange marriages reflect the Galo's communal ethos, where marital alliances serve broader socio-economic goals rather than individual preferences. However, younger generations increasingly prioritize consent-based unions, signalling cultural evolution.

Levirate Marriage (*Yigo/Rigo Ginam*) Among the Galo

The Galo tribe practices *Yigo/Rigo Ginam*, a form of levirate marriage where a widow is inherited by her deceased husband's male kin. This custom ensures the widow and her children remain within the family structure, providing them with economic and social protection. To maintain the inheritance hierarchy, the deceased husband's unmarried brothers (elder or younger) hold the primary right to marry the widow. If no brothers are available, the obligation extends to male cousins or other close relatives. In case of bride price adjustments, if the deceased husband had paid only half the bride price, the inheriting brother must settle the remaining half. This reinforces the economic ties between the families. The purpose and rationale behind this practice is to ensure the widow and her children are cared for within the kinship network and maintain the deceased's lineage and property within the family. This also proves social stability and prevents external claims on the widow or her children.

Sororate Marriage (*Yigne Lanam*) Among the Galo

The Galo tribe recognizes *Yigne Lanam*, a sororate marriage tradition where a widower or husband may remarry his deceased wife's sister or female cousin. Unlike coercive arrangements, this practice requires mutual consent from all parties involved. The key aspects of the practice could be taken as voluntary remarriage. If a man's wife passes away, her sister or cousin may willingly agree to marry him, ensuring familial continuity. The union is not forced both the man and the woman's family must approve. In cases where the first wife is unable to bear children, she may permit her husband to marry her sister to fulfil the desire for offspring. The husband cannot proceed without his wife's and her family's consent. If all parties agree, a new wedding can be arranged without requiring an additional bride price (*Tapum*), as the original marriage ties already bind the families. The social and cultural rationale behind the practice is for family continuity as it strengthens kinship bonds by keeping marital alliances within the same lineage. Historically, it was encouraged to sustain clan numbers, though this is less emphasized today. With mutual support, it ensures care for widowers and maintains stability for any existing children. While still practiced, *Yigne Lanam* is becoming less common due to greater emphasis on individual choice in marriage and influence of monogamous norms and legal marriage regulations.

Abduction Marriage (*Nyimen Sinam*) Among the Galo

Nyimen Sinam refers to a forced marriage practice where a man abducts a girl to compel matrimony, typically occurring when the girl resists her family's arranged match (*Nyida Tagaknam*). The suitor faces parental rejection or cannot afford the bride price (*Tapum*). Unlike secretive abductions, this practice is semi-consensual, the girl's family is often aware and may tacitly accept the act to avoid social stigma, despite initial opposition.

The social dynamics and rationale behind these acts are regarded as a "shortcut" when negotiations fail or bride price demands are prohibitive. The abductor's family may later negotiate reparations (e.g., reduced *Tapum*) to legitimize the union. Primarily, it affects young women, stripping them of agency and was rarely condemned if the abductor is from a socially powerful clan. And post-abduction, the *Nyibu* (priest) may perform rituals to "purify" the transgression, integrating the couple into the community. But in the contemporary days, this practice has declined as per the modern laws (e.g., India's PCMA, 2006) criminalize abduction marriages, though enforcement in tribal areas remains weak. Younger generations increasingly reject *Nyimen Sinam*, viewing it as a violation of human rights. It is also in contradiction with Indian Law, as it violates Sections 366 (kidnapping) and 375 (rape) of the IPC, yet tribal autonomy often overrides statutory

enforcement. The Women organization and NGOs also report cases where abducted girls face pressure to "accept" the marriage to avoid ostracization

IV. Recent Trends in Galo Marriage Customs

The Galo marriage system is undergoing significant transformation due to increasing literacy, technological advancement, economic development, and religious influences particularly because of Christianity. While traditional practices persist, modern values are reshaping marital norms in many ways. There is a shift in marriage arrangements from parental negotiation to individual choice. Traditionally, marriages were arranged by parents, with bride price (*Ari*) negotiations central to the process. Today, love marriages are gaining acceptance, with parents increasingly respecting their children's preferences. There is a declining emphasis on bride price. Historically, the groom's family provided livestock, brassware, and other valuables to the bride's family. But recently modern Galo families prioritize their daughter's happiness over material compensation, leading to reduced or symbolic bride prices. The educated Galo women now oppose polygamy and coerced marriages. They mostly reject the practice of polygamy and forced unions. But the practice of polygamy is still practiced, especially among the wealthy persons. The more the man is rich, the more he owns wives. The Galo women organizations are fighting tooth and nails against it but still the practice persists. The Levirate customs (e.g., inheriting a brother's widow) are fading, especially in urbanized communities.

The influence of Christians on the traditional customs and rituals are in vogue. Christian Galos wed in churches, officiated by pastors, while animist Galos retain home-based ceremonies. Rice beer (*Apong*) is replaced with tea, sweets, or soft drinks in Christian weddings. Brides often wear white gowns, and grooms opt for black suits, though traditional attire remains an option. These changing customs among the Christians are often criticized by the animist Galos as diluting and losing the traditional value system of the community. The popular term that goes, 'loss of culture is loss of tradition', as a direct criticism against the Christian followers. When it comes to women's rights, widows and daughters now have inheritance rights, which is seen as a departure from traditional norms. Property ownership among women, though still limited, is gradually increasing. But the landed ancestral properties still belong to the male counterparts. There is a decline in harmful practices like child marriage has significantly reduced. Omen-reading (e.g., chicken/pig liver divination) persists but holds less sway over marital decisions. Expensive traditional weddings are being simplified today with aluminium/steel utensils replace bamboo items. Waste reduction is emphasized during ceremonies. But the challenges still persist, like in rural areas, they still observe some archaic customs (e.g., cicisbism that is shared responsibility for sisters-in-law). But it is rarely practiced today, this allowed brothers to share a wife, ensuring familial continuity. The economic disparities of the family limited the universal adoption of modern practice.

V. Women's Role in Post-Divorce Conflict Resolution

Galo women often face systemic discrimination within their community, particularly during marital conflicts and divorce proceedings. While customs vary across tribe, common patterns emerge in how disputes are mediated and resolved. Divorce is uncommon but permitted separated couples may remarry under traditional rules. Children typically remain with their father's lineage post-divorce. The grounds for divorce as accepted, include infidelity, domestic violence, alcoholism, infertility, and incompatibility. Galo women can initiate divorce but often concede to societal pressure. In case of conflict resolution mechanisms, family or the council mediation are preferred. Disputes are typically resolved by elders or village councils known as *Keba*. Gender biases in outcomes are often seen in case of grown-up children and the custody favours fathers, and nursing infants may stay with mothers. Adulterous wives often face harsher penalties, such as forfeiting bride price and sometimes property too. Remarriage is permitted after rituals, though social stigma persists. Village councils still dominate proceedings, limiting women's autonomy. Traditionally, the tribe strictly prohibited inter-clan marriages, permitting unions only within their own community but in recent times there is change in the trend and love marriages are increasingly accepted.

VI. Conclusion

Marriage in the Galo community is not just an individual affair but a socially sanctioned institution reinforcing clan bonds. This structured system underscores the Galo's emphasis on familial and communal harmony in marital alliances. Today, the Galo marriages blend traditional and modern elements, with Christianity acting as a major catalyst. Women's autonomy in marriage and property rights is improving but remains uneven. While adapting with the modern trends, they still retain symbolic rituals like omen-reading as cultural markers. Still among few families, the kinship & lineage considerations are taken into account and the bride's lineage and family status are carefully evaluated to ensure compatibility. For mediation and ritual significance, the *Lampo* (mediator) and *Nyibu* (priest) still play crucial roles in legitimizing the union. Bride price and clan endogamy remain central to Galo identity. As, women are highly valued for their labour in farming, childcare, and household management. The bride price compensates the family for losing their

daughter's contributions. In modern times the practice of payment structure remains the same but cash gifts are also supplementing traditional items.

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