

LIFE, DEATH AND SOUL: A STUDY OF INDIGENOUS FUNERAL RITES AMONG THE GALO OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH.

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Abstract: *The Galo people of Arunachal Pradesh, a prominent group within the Tani ethno-linguistic family, maintain a complex spiritual worldview rooted in Donyi-Polo animism. In this belief system, death is not a terminal state but a critical rite of passage where the soul (Miigo) must be carefully navigated between the physical world and the spiritual realm. This paper explores the cultural and ritualistic dichotomy between natural, auspicious deaths—epitomized by the Chingur-Dengur ceremony for elders—and the inauspicious, "bad" deaths categorized as Tale Sinam (accidents/suicides), Giri-Tale (murder), Nyipo Sinam (maternal death), and Yasi Sinam (infant mortality).*

For the Galo, a life lived in harmony with community values culminates in a celebratory transition. Natural death rituals emphasize legacy and honor, utilizing symbolic offerings like eggs, the application of Iti (sacred paste), and the sacrifice of dogs to serve as spiritual guides. These ceremonies, often led by a Nyibo (shaman), ensure the soul's peaceful integration into the ancestral domain. Conversely, untimely or violent deaths are viewed as disruptions caused by malevolent spirits (Uyus or Urom). These events trigger a state of spiritual pollution (Nyonam), necessitating intense, "notorious" rituals such as Gidi Erap Tedum (or Erap Genam). These ceremonies are designed to forcibly sever the ties between the living and the deceased's restless spirit, which is believed to haunt the shadows and evade the light of Donyi (the Sun).

The study further examines the specialized taboos associated with maternal and infant deaths. In Nyipo Sinam, the death of a woman in childbirth is treated with extreme caution, involving remote jungle burials and month-long family isolations to prevent spiritual contagion. Similarly, Yasi Sinam addresses the precarious nature of infancy, focusing on separation to prevent future infertility or misfortune. These practices involve strict dietary restrictions (Ari Rinam) and symbolic acts of expulsion, such as the use of ginger and stone-throwing, to cleanse the community.

Finally, the abstract highlights the contemporary challenges facing these traditions. As modernization and external influences reshape the social landscape, traditional frameworks serve not only as religious observances but as essential psychological mechanisms for grief processing and communal resilience in a society where formal therapy is absent. By analyzing these funerary rites, we gain insight into the Galo's profound emphasis on reciprocity, spiritual balance, and the preservation of indigenous identity amidst a changing world.

Keywords: *Galo Tribe, Death, Nyibo (Shamanism), Ari Rinam.*

INTRODUCTION

The *Galo* people are an indigenous tribe primarily residing in the West Siang, East Siang, and Lepa-Rada districts of Arunachal Pradesh, India. They belong to the larger *Tani* group of tribes, which share linguistic and cultural affinities with other groups like the *Adi* and *Nyishi*. They practice a form of animism known as *Donyi-Polo*, which reveres the sun (*Donyi*) and moon (*Polo*) as supreme deities, alongside a pantheon of spirits (*Uyus*) associated with nature, ancestors, and life events. This belief system profoundly influences their rituals, including those related to death, which are seen as transitions from the physical world to the spiritual realm.

In *Galo* culture, death is not viewed merely as an end but as a rite of passage where the soul (*Miigo*) must be guided properly to avoid unrest among the living. Rituals emphasize harmony between the living, the dead, and the spirits. Deaths are categorized broadly into natural (e.g., due to old age or illness) and unnatural (e.g., accidents, violence, or premature). Natural deaths, particularly from old age, are often considered auspicious or inevitable, reflecting a life well-lived in alignment with community values. They typically involve simpler, purifying rituals focused on closure and emotional healing, contrasting with more complex appeasement ceremonies for unnatural deaths. The death rituals are viewed as auspicious, completing life's cycle, and involve purifying ceremonies focused on closure and legacy. Unnatural deaths, by contrast, require more elaborate appeasement of spirits to prevent misfortune. The *Nyibo* (shaman) leads chants and sacrifices, invoking ancestors and nature spirits (*Uyus*). Funerals typically include body preparation, burial (traditional, though cremation influences exist), offerings, and post-burial cleansing like *Yekak-Yelak* at a river for emotional healing.

The *Chingur-Dengur* ritual, as described in the context of death due to old age in the *Galo* community, appears to be a localized or sub-clan-specific ceremony not extensively documented in public ethnographic sources. The sacrifice of a dog to guide the departed soul, the application of *Iti* on the forehead for those who performed rituals like *Namde Lala* and *Togu Panam* during their lifetime, and the placement of eggs in the hands of the deceased—it aligns with broader *Galo* funeral traditions that emphasize spiritual guidance, honor, and symbolic offerings. These elements reflect the *Galo's* animistic *Donyi-Polo* faith, where death is a transition requiring rituals to ensure the soul's (*Miigo*) peaceful journey and to maintain harmony between the living and spirits.

Animal sacrifices are common in *Galo* rituals, symbolizing tribute to spirits and aiding the soul's passage. *Mithun* (semi-domesticated bovines) or pigs are often offered in major ceremonies, but dogs hold specific symbolic roles in some indigenous traditions globally, including as guides in the afterlife. Eggs, as symbols of life and renewal, appear in various tribal rites, potentially representing fertility or rebirth in the spiritual realm. The application of marks like *Iti* (possibly a variant of *eti* or a local term for a sacred paste or *tilak*) o

The *Chingur-Dengur*, potentially a variant name for a funeral sub-ritual (not directly named in sources but fitting descriptions of honorable old-age send-offs), integrates these elements to honor elders who lived in alignment with community values, especially those who participated in prestigious lifetime rituals like *Togu Panam*. In essence, *Chingur-Dengur* encapsulates *Galo* resilience, blending symbolism for guidance, honor, and renewal in old-age deaths.

Unlike natural deaths from old age (e.g., *Chingur-Dengur*), which are auspicious and emphasize celebration and harmony, untimely or unnatural deaths—categorized as *Tale Sinam* (encompassing accidents and suicides) and *Giri-Tale* (murder)—are viewed with apprehension. These are seen as disruptions caused by malevolent spirits (*Uyus* or *Urom*), potentially leading to unrest, curses, or further misfortunes if not properly addressed. The soul (*Miigo*) of such deceased is believed to linger as a tormented or vengeful entity, requiring intense rituals to pacify it and protect the living. This contrasts with the purifying, community-focused rites for elders, highlighting a cultural dichotomy between "good" (natural) and "bad" (unnatural) deaths.

Tale Sinam (Accidents and Suicide): This category covers premature, self-inflicted, or accidental ends, such as falls, drownings, or intentional self-harm. In *Galo* cosmology, these are attributed to imbalances with nature spirits or personal misfortunes, leading the soul to become a wandering *Urom*—potentially harmful if not guided away. Suicide, in particular, is seen as a profound disruption, with the soul tormented by evil spirits, risking possession or harm to the living, especially during vulnerable times like childbirth.

Giri-Tale (Murder): Referring to violent deaths by human hands, this is considered the most brutal, often linked to sorcery, feuds, or external malevolence. The soul is believed to enter the domain of the spirit responsible (e.g., a vengeful *Uyu*), carrying resentment that could curse the community. Both categories contrast with natural deaths, where souls peacefully integrate into ancestral realms; here, they may wander near graves for days, appearing in dreams or causing illnesses, emphasizing the need for separation rituals to prevent reincarnation as insects or malevolent entities. Overall, these deaths are inauspicious, disrupting communal harmony and imposing taboos (*nyonam*) to contain spiritual pollution. Beliefs underscore reciprocity: improper rites could invite further tragedies, while effective ones restore balance.

Key Ritual: Gidi Erap Tedum (Erap Tenam/Genam) The *Gidi Erap Tedum* ritual, performed for these untimely deaths, is a localized or dialectal variant of the well-documented *Erap Tenam* or *Erap Genam* in *Galo* tradition. This is a "notorious" ceremony, sometimes associated with sorcery-like elements due to its intensity and focus on pacification or metaphorical "assassination" of lingering evil influences. It is reserved for brutally demised persons, aiming to sever ties between the tormented soul and the living,

preventing hauntings or curses. The ritual symbolically "eliminates" malevolent energies tied to the death, ensuring the soul's departure to a spiritual domain without backlash. For *Tale Sinam*, it addresses accidental disruptions; for *Giri-Tale*, it counters violent resentments. It reinforces *Donyi-Polo* principles by appeasing *Uyus*, but its witchcraft connotations make it controversial in some areas, performed discreetly to avoid stigma.

For untimely deaths like *Tale Sinam* (accidents and suicides) and *Giri-Tale* (murders) in the *Galo* community, the *Gidi Erap Tedum* ritual (a variant of *Erap Tenam*) is performed by a *Nyibo* shaman, beginning with invocations and chants to pacify malevolent spirits, followed by symbolic acts like burning offerings or using items such as ginger and rice to neutralize evil residues, and concluding with purification rites after a 5-10 day taboo period of confinement and dietary restrictions; the body, prepared on a bamboo stretcher outside the home to avoid contamination, is buried in a remote cemetery with the deceased facing away, sealed with bamboo, and minimal offerings like rice beer, while possessions are burned to sever earthly ties. Socially, mourning is limited and inauspicious, with few visitors to the house due to pollution fears, only close kin and clan members participating in restrained activities like overnight stays or warning songs, and broader community involvement avoided to prevent spiritual transfer. In summary, untimely deaths like *Tale Sinam* and *Giri-Tale* evoke rituals like *Gidi Erap Tedum* to navigate spiritual dangers, with practices underscoring isolation and pacification. This framework protects the community while honoring the departed's turbulent transition, differing starkly from auspicious old-age rites.

In the *Galo* community, *Nyipo Sinam* refers to the untimely and unnatural death of a woman during childbirth, classified similarly to other premature or violent ends (e.g., *Tale Sinam* for accidents/suicides), evoking deep spiritual concerns rooted in *Donyi-Polo* animism. This event is attributed to malevolent spirits like *Nyipo/Apom* or *Uyu* (devils), which are believed to target pregnant women, potentially killing the child in the womb or causing complications during labor. Drawing parallels from related *Tani* tribes like the *Adi*, where such deaths (termed *Nyipong*) are caused by spirits such as *Nyiji Nyipong*, the *Galo* view this as a disruption by unseen forces, leading the soul (*Miigo*) to wander tormented in shadowy realms rather than peacefully transitioning to ancestral domains. The belief that the soul does not stay in lighted areas underscores its ethereal, unrestful state—potentially becoming a vengeful *Urom* (evil spirit) that haunts in darkness, avoiding illumination to evade detection or purification, and risking harm to the living if not appeased. This contrasts with auspicious old-age deaths (e.g., *Chingur-Dengur*), emphasizing pollution (*nyonam*) and the need for isolation to contain spiritual contamination.

Nyipo Sinam is seen as an unnatural misfortune, reflecting deities' displeasure or misconduct, where the soul ascends to tormented afterlife domains like *Taleng Among* (*Adi* parallel), subject to evil influences. The soul lingers near the grave for days, appearing in dreams or causing illnesses, and may reincarnate as insects if unresolved. Contact with death during pregnancy is taboo, as it could harm the unborn, aligning with broader restrictions like *Hinam-Rinam* for expectant mothers and husbands, avoiding certain activities to prevent spirit wrath.

Led by a *Nyibo* (shaman), the process begins with invocations (e.g., chants from myths) to guide the soul and ward off *Uyus*. The body, viewed as polluted, is prepared outside the home on a bamboo stretcher, not in premises to avoid contamination—burial occurs in a remote jungle cemetery (not village grounds), facing away, and minimal offerings like rice beer (*Opo*) or tokens; possessions are burned to sever ties. No animal sacrifices occur, focusing on expulsion. Post-burial, a variant of *Gidi Erap Tedum* may involve shouts, stone-throwing, or demolishing sites to banish *Urom*.

The family observes strict *nyonam* to prevent further misfortune, including a month-long isolation where members do not leave the house and no visitors are allowed, reflecting pollution fears and soul unrest. Mourning is restrained and inauspicious; few participate beyond kin, avoiding collective gatherings to prevent spirit transfer, with songs warning of afterlife perils. For a year, '*Ari*' (*Ari Rinam*, taboo observance) imposes dietary restrictions, avoiding items like ginger (linked to life-long bans in rituals) and soybean (local variant), plus certain fruits/vegetables (e.g., spinach, pepper) to purify and appease spirits. Disobedience invites accidents. *Nyipo Sinam* reinforces *Galo* emphasis on harmony, with modernization and Christianity challenging practices, though revival efforts persist. It highlights gender dynamics, as maternal deaths stigmatize families, serving as psychological grief mechanisms in a therapy-lacking society.

Yasi Sinam refers to the untimely death of a newborn or young child (typically within 1-3 years of birth) in *Galo* culture, categorized as an unnatural or premature loss akin to other disruptive events like accidents (*Tale Sinam*) or maternal childbirth deaths (*Nyipo Sinam*). This aligns with the broader *Tani* tribal cosmology, where such deaths are attributed to malevolent spirits (*Uyus* or *Yapoms*) that target vulnerable individuals, including infants, potentially "carrying away" children as sylvan deities. The *Galo* view infancy as a precarious stage, with rituals performed for living infants' well-being to ward off fevers or spiritual threats, but *Yasi Sinam* evokes fear of spiritual imbalance, as the soul (*Miigo*) may wander as a tormented *Urom*, haunting in shadows and risking harm to the family, similar to beliefs in neighboring tribes where infant souls ascend to tormented realms. This contrasts with auspicious old-age deaths (*Chingur-Dengur*), emphasizing pollution (*nyonam*) and the need for containment to prevent curses or further misfortunes.

In *Galo* animism (*Donyi-Polo*), *Yasi Sinam* is seen as a profound disruption, often linked to evil forces or ancestral displeasure, preventing the soul's peaceful transition to ancestral realms. The soul is believed to linger near the grave, appearing in dreams or

causing illnesses, avoiding lighted areas to evade purification—echoing taboos where families maintain darkness or isolation to respect the unrestful spirit. Stigma (similar to *Yasu* for murder) may attach, viewing the death as ominous, with risks like family childlessness (*Tirgi*) if not ritually addressed.

Led by a *Nyibo* (shaman), *Yasi Sinam* rituals are minimal and focused on separation, lacking the honors of natural deaths. The body, considered polluted, is prepared outside the home and buried immediately in a remote jungle cemetery (not village grounds), without elaborate funerals or animal sacrifices—a variant of *Gidi Erap Tedum (Erap Tenam)* may follow, with invocations (*Ya* chants) to expel evil, symbolic burning at junctions (using ginger/*Takeng*), and community actions like shouts or stone-throwing to drive *Urom*. Post-burial purification (*Piide Dode*) uses leaves/water to end initial taboos. *Yasi Sinam* underscores *Galo* vulnerability in early life, reinforcing communal harmony through taboos while stigmatizing the family temporarily.

These rituals preserve *Galo* identity amid modernization, but face challenges: Christian influences may simplify or replace elements, while urbanization reduces taboos. Modern advocacy efforts view them as psychological tools for grief processing in a society without formal therapy. It suggests *Tani*-wide adaptations to environmental and spiritual beliefs, emphasizing separation for unnatural deaths to maintain harmony.

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