

Understanding social metamorphosis of a tribal society in the Eastern Himalayas through intangible heritage

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ABSTRACT

The Galo tribe in the Himalayas has a rich heritage of tangible and intangible cultures that are manifested in their various life patterns through arts, crafts, festivals and oral traditions. This paper uses intangible heritage as materials and attempts to reconstruct the early society of the Galo during which significant discoveries and developments took place. Intangible heritage passed down through the ages is a chronological reference and a living archive of historical accounts. The paper traces the cultural shifts over time with the help of these living expressions. Mopin, a perfect manifestation of intangible heritage among the Galo, is embedded in their culture and exhibits the vibrant aspects of their cultural life. Traditionally, it was a rite of propitiation, performed individually by families only after affirming through chicken liver examination. A nyibo (priest), after invoking the spirits of Mopin, Pinku, and Pinte, sacrificed a chicken, then inspected the veins and arteries in the

liver, to determine the necessity of a Mopin–Pintum rite to address the agricultural crisis, when households faced adversities such as crop failure due to weather or pest outbreaks. However, in the second half of the 19th century, a drastic change transformed Mopin into a festival. This study of the Mopin myth goes beyond its evolution as a festival. It also sheds light on the primitive stage of Galo society and the emergence of various customs, especially historical events such as the discovery of paddy, the beginning of agriculture and the development of marriage customs. Therefore, the paper explores the social metamorphosis of Mopin from *Pintum* (rite) to a festival and the impact of these changes on traditional social settings.

Keywords

Social-Metamorphosis, Mopin, Gynocentric, Matronym, Rite, Leaders, Mother-rule, Pintum, Sacrificial-rite, Indigenous festival

Introduction

Northeast India, ethnically and culturally, is considered one of the most diverse regions in the world, as the region is inhabited by more than 200 tribes and sub-tribes (Sivakumar 2013). About 12% of the total tribal population in India is settled in this region (Ali and Das 2003). The region is renowned for its cultural variety, and varied ecologies and landscapes. It is one of the hotspots of multifarious ethnicity and multiculturalism.

The region has long been a crossroads for different races of people and, as a result, we see the phenomenon of multiculturalism. Chatterji (1970) identifies Northeast India as a region where ideas and material culture have existed since prehistoric times, giving rise to the immense diversity

of races and civilisations that make India unique today. On a similar note, Mills (1928) called Northeast India one of the great migration routes of humanity. Additionally, because of the prehistoric and protohistoric migrations of people into and out of its adjacent territories, the region has been referred to as the 'Great Indian Corridor' (Medhi 2007).

Ethnic diversity has been crucial in developing rich cultures among tribal communities inhabiting various states across Northeast India. The cultural richness, both tangible and intangible, of the tribal communities is displayed beautifully in their festivals, linguistic variation, indigenous cuisines, arts, costumes and dances. The cultural riches of the region are evident from the fact that it is home to more than 220 languages and hundreds of

festivals [Das 2023].

Arunachal Pradesh, the easternmost state of India, is an integral part of Northeast India and truly reflects the region's diverse cultural tapestry. The state is inhabited by approximately 26 major tribes and several lesser-known tribes. These tribes exhibit unique cultural practices and traditional institutions that reflect a fine legacy of inherited customs. It has justifiably earned the sobriquet 'an ethnologist's paradise'.

Situated in this culturally diverse region of Arunachal Pradesh, the Galo tribe offers a significant example of evolving ritual practice. Grounded in ethnographic fieldwork conducted in various Galo-inhabited regions of Arunachal Pradesh, this paper explores the transformation of Mopin from *Pintum*, a household ritual, into a community festival, and critically examines its implications for the traditional social institutions and cultural fabric of Galo society, through an analysis of intangible heritage, particularly oral traditions such as myths, folklore, folktales and legends. The paper first discusses mythologies to establish a foundational understanding of the Mopin myth and its associated characters and episodes. As the myths provide crucial frameworks for interpreting cultural and social changes, this method enables a more comprehensive examination of social transformation.

A set of open-ended ethnographic questionnaires has been developed to collect oral narratives and first-hand accounts. These questions elicit detailed insights into the traditional practices, knowledge and cultural transformations surrounding Mopin. The following questions were designed to guide informal interviews and conversations:

1. Could you describe how Mopin as a *Pintum* was traditionally performed in earlier times within the family?
2. What traditional methods or signs were used to determine the appropriate time for performing the Mopin ritual?
3. What significant changes have you observed in the performance and meaning of Mopin over the years?
4. Do you recall how and when Mopin transitioned from a household ritual (*Pintum*) to a public festival?
5. What reasons or circumstances do you believe led to the transformation of Mopin into a larger communal event?

6. What oral narratives or stories have been passed down to you regarding the origin of paddy or agriculture among the Galo?
7. How is farming or food production knowledge reflected in the Mopin myth or associated rituals?
8. Can you explain any traditional marriage customs connected to Mopin?
9. What were some customary practices, taboos or ritual obligations observed during Mopin in earlier generations?
10. In your view, which aspects of the traditional Mopin practices are important to preserve for future generations, and why?

Area of the study

The Galo are one of the major tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. They are predominantly domiciled in the West Siang, Leparada and Lower Siang districts, with a small population in the East Siang, Lower Dibang Valley and Upper Subansiri districts. The present study is based on the Galo tribe of West Siang district (Figure 1). The district is divided into 21 administrative circles and 461 villages with a population of around 150,000 [Census of India 2011].

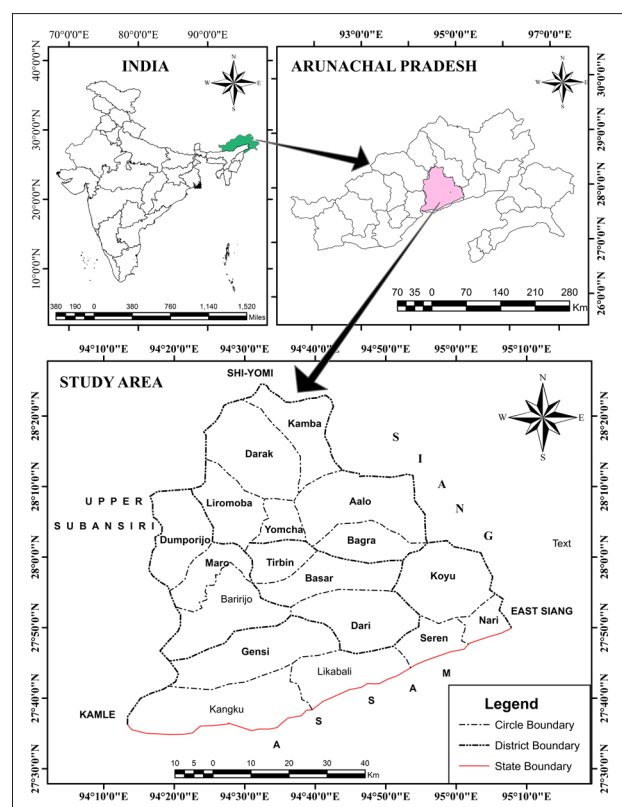


Figure 1
Map of the study area.
Source: State Remote Sensing Application, Govt. of Arunachal Pradesh and generated using ArcGIS 10.3.

The emergence of West Siang as an administrative division dates back to the colonial period in 1914 when undivided Siang was a part of the administrative division known as the Central and Eastern Sections, Northeast Frontier Track. This was redesignated as the Sadiya Frontier Track in 1919. It was divided into two administrative charges: the Abor Hill District and the Mishmi Hill District in 1948. In 1954, the Abor Hill District became the Siang Frontier Division and was renamed Siang District in 1965. Finally, the *Arunachal Pradesh (Reorganisation of the District) Act*, No. 3 of 1980, made West Siang a distinct administrative subdivision on 1 June 1980.

Introduction to the tribe

The progenitors of the Galo resided in the upper reaches of the Northeastern Himalayan highlands in and around the Indo-Tibetan frontiers. From there, people migrated to lower regions where they established their settlements. The social structure of the Galo is built on a patriarchal system with a strong clan organisation organised around descent from a common ancestor that strictly follows the system of clan exogamy.

The exact meaning and etymology of the term 'Galo' remain ambiguous, with various theories proposed by researchers. Some sections of the Galo trace their ancestry to a mountain pass called Golo Yorbe, suggesting that the name 'Galo' evolved from Golo (H. Ete, personal communication, 24 May 2024). Hilaly (2015) echoes this, linking the name to Golo Yorlo or Topo Golo, prominent landmarks in the tribe's historical sojourn.

Another perspective explores the tribe's patronymic naming system, as described by Post (2008), where a child's name combines the father's last syllable (patrisyllable) with the child's own (autosyllable). For example, a man named Jiryom might name his son Yomli or Yomto. M. Ete (2021) notes that the Galo, once known for raiding fields, associated themselves with strength and courage. *Nyiga*, in their language, means 'courageous', therefore possibly influencing the formation of the name 'Galo' within the patronymic system. Hence, 'Galo' comes from the word '*Nyiga*'. Another theory ties the name to the tribe's migration from Riga (Upper Siang), as the word 'Galo' also signifies 'descending' in the Galo language (P. Kamum, personal communication, 13 May 2020). This reflects the tribe's movement from higher altitudes in Upper Siang to present-day West Siang.

Related to the origin of the name 'Galo', it is also surmised that the inception of the word is connected to the style of people's haircuts (H. Ete, personal communication, 24 May 2024). The Adi, a neighbouring tribe of the Galo, trimmed their hair in a particular style, popularly known as *bati* (bowl) cutting (bowl cut), in which they trimmed their hair around the head above the ears. Thus, it resembled trimmed hair, which looks like an inverted bowl.

Unlike their neighbours, the Galo did not adopt a fully rounded haircut but trimmed their hair with a downward trim from the temples and ears to the nape of the neck. The term 'Galo' signifying a downward movement aptly reflected this distinctive practice of cutting the hair in a descending line toward the nape. Thus, the haircut became a key marker of identity, differentiating the Galo not only by language and culture but also through physical appearance, one of the most immediate bases for ethnonymic identification. Here, a reference may be made to the *Chulikatas*, a term the British used for the Idu Mishmi tribe based on their haircut (Bhattacharjee 1983).

Historically, the Galo were referred to by outsiders as 'Duba', 'Doba', 'Dobah Abors' and 'Gallong Abors' (Dunn 1896), names rarely recognised or used by the community itself. These exonyms originated primarily from neighbouring groups, particularly the Tibetans and Ahoms (D. Ete 2021). With the advent of British colonial rule in the Brahmaputra Valley in the early 20th century, such nomenclature, especially 'Abor' and its variants, was adopted, institutionalised and widely disseminated. As a result, terms like 'Abor' persisted well into the post-independence period and continue to appear in academic and historical discourse.

Hence, there is no single and definite idea behind the origin and meaning of the word 'Galo'. However, this branch of the Tani tribe inhabiting the central zone of the state has been popularly known as the Galo group of the Tani tribe, who belong to Tibeto-Mongoloid stock and speak the Galo language, a branch of the Tibeto-Burmese language family.

Methodology

Intangible heritage as a source

It is infeasible to reconstruct, using conventional sources, the early history of a preliterate tribe whose

tangible cultures are primarily based on perishable material. Under such conditions, myths and social practices, the essential intangible heritage of the Galo that has been passed down over the ages, become a vital source of information about their past. Intangible heritage, including myths, legends and folklore, encodes historical, social and moral values that offer insights into their early society. Therefore, the mythography technique is used, which involves identifying, analysing and comprehending the social messages and historical data within a myth.

Myths often incorporate multiple layers of meaning, concentrating on moral teachings or entertainment, while others encapsulate historical events and societal values. Therefore, myths such as *Takartaji ge dorri panam*, *Anyi Pinku Pinte* and *Anyi Kari Karnya* were selected for analysis, as their symbols and characters align with historical events and the community's social structures.

Initial observations and informal conversations conducted during the early phases of fieldwork helped to establish rapport with community members and guided the formulation of more focused research questions. Oral interviews were conducted across several Galo-inhabited regions of Arunachal Pradesh. Interviews were held with *Nyibo* (priests), *Boo* (assistant priests), elders, *Gaon Bura* (village headmen) and *Nyjijik-nyikok* (elders recognised for their deep knowledge of oral traditions). These individuals serve as living repositories of community-based knowledge, particularly concerning the evolving meanings, ritual practices and mythologies surrounding Mopin. A semi-structured interview format was employed to allow both thematic consistency and the flexibility for open-ended narratives and cultural reflections.

Before the fieldwork, a critical review of relevant literature, including works such as Srivastava (1962), Dutta (1976), Nyori (1993), Kamki (2001), Lego (2006), Padu (2020), Bagra (2016), D. Ete (2021), M. Ete (2021) and other regional ethnographies, was undertaken to contextualise the oral narratives and to explore how academic interpretations intersect with lived traditions and evolving cultural expressions.

The field study was carried out in two distinct phases: in May 2020 and subsequently in May–June 2024. Interviews were conducted in key locations, namely: Lido Village (13

May 2020 and 22 May 2020), Lutak Village (14 May 2020), Gako Dapo Village (18 May 2020), Deke Gadi Village (19 May 2020), under the Tirbin Administrative Circle, and Darka Village (22 May 2024) Aalo Town (24 May 2024), and Rigo Village (4 June 2024) under the Aalo Administrative Circle. These locations were selected for the presence of individuals with specialised traditional and narrative knowledge related to Mopin.

The analysis of field data revealed patterns of social metamorphosis embedded in indigenous narratives, forming the basis for mythographic reconstruction through interviews, supplemented by selective published sources. Aligned with qualitative ethnographic methods, this approach prioritises oral narratives, further contextualised through critical engagement with relevant literature to synthesise empirical and secondary insights into social transformation.

Mythological backdrop

Myths draw on social memory to transmit oral traditions across generations (Vansina 1965). These traditions offer critical insights into the cultural development of preliterate societies without archaeological and written records. Galo culture is rich in such traditions, with Mopin at its core, a sacred festival embedded in oral traditions, folk chants, songs and dances, now transformed into an indigenous festival among the Galo tribe.

Concerning the importance of myth in the study of the past, Park and Garrafa (2022) argue that '[w]hat stands out more than anything else is the reference that the myths of our concern make towards a primordial time that memory barely reaches' (73). The origin of Mopin is embedded in Galo mythology. To understand its connection with the emergence of agriculture and marriage customs, it is essential to examine myths concerning the creation of the universe, earth and humanity, particularly those narrating the advent of cultivation, which reshaped subsistence practices and social structures.¹

Regarding the creation of cosmic orders and supernatural entities as per the Galo mythology, the Universe, encompassing spirits, humanity, plants and animals, was created by a supreme creator known as Jimi Ane (*Ane* means 'mother') also known as Jimi Bote (R. Gadi, personal communication, 18 May 2020). Analysis of the cosmogonic genealogy of the creation of the Universe offers a Galo sense of chronology of time and creation.

Under the Galloic conception of time and space, creation began during *Koyum*, a primordial period marked by vast emptiness and formlessness.² In this void, *Jimi*, the almighty creator, formed the Universe. Galo myths maintain that all existence originates from *Jimi*, who first created *Jisi* (land) and *Medo* (sky). From *Miji*, another of *Jimi*'s creations, emerged *Jite* and *Jigo* (the sun and the moon), and *Jilo*, a bamboo species sacred in ritual practices. The sun and moon illuminated the world and marked seasonal cycles. The creation continued with *Mika*, who gave birth to *Kari-Kate*, spirits associated with prosperity, intelligence and vitality. *Miba*, another creation, gave birth to *Bagi*, the spirit of streams and gorges, and to *Miku-Miya*, a winged spirit who flattened rugged terrain into plains, though the process was hindered by bats, which explains the mountainous landscape. Finally, *Mitur* was created, from whom emerged *Turbu*, a spirit linked to the vitality and wellbeing of youth.

Continuing the act of creation, *Jimi* brought forth *Tani*, regarded as the first man. The lineage of mankind unfolded as follows: *Michi* begot *Chisi*, who gave birth to *Sibuk*; from *Sibuk* came *Bukchi*, followed by *Chitu*, and then *Turi*, who conceived *Rini*, popularly known as *Tani*. Subsequently, *Jimi* created *Mimo*, from which *Mopin* was born. After empowering each creation with purpose, *Jimi* instructed *Mopin* to adorn herself with *Buyi-Gayi*, a circular bamboo ornament resembling a belt with white flowers, and *Teksi-Tekbar*, a sacred decorative item placed on the *Dipi* (altar). *Mopin* was then directed to settle at *Endi Kadi Ge Rile*, a mythical place marked by the sacred *Ensi* and *Jika* trees, now ritually significant in Galo culture.

Mopin was entrusted with replenishing the *ambin dutub* and *peri-pekak* (bamboo and gourd grain containers) for those suffering scarcity. *Jimi* instructed her to travel by river, navigating the watercourse on a bamboo raft to reach *Endi Kadi Ge Rile*. Accordingly, the Galo believe that blessings from *Mopin* arrive through rivers and streams during the festival. This narrative thus explains the divine origins of both *Mopin* and *Man* in Galo cosmology.

The myths and legends of the Galo abound with tales of animosity and deceit between *Taki* and *Takartaji* (tricksters and malevolent spirits), contemporaneous with *Tani* (man), on the other hand. These folktales often illustrate episodes in such conflicts. Even the myth surrounding the genesis of *Mopin* revolves around the conflict between the two.

Based on the analysis of a popular myth known as *Takar Taji ge dorri panaam*, also known as *Tani la Takartaji*, one tale recounts the origin of *Mopin* with the enduring enmity between *Tani* (man) and *Takartaji* (malevolent spirits) (K. Bomjen, personal communication, 14 May 2020). In this account, *Takartaji* planned a grand ritual called *Togu/Dorri Panam*, involving the sacrifice of ten *Joba/Sobo* (*Bos frontalis*), and invited all living beings to attend. Upon learning of this through *Pensam* (bat), *Tani* agitated and devised a plan to intercept and seize the ten sacrificial animals in defiance. This event marks the mythical advent of *Mopin* into human life.³

Before reaching *Takartaji*'s place, *Tani* set his plan in motion by crafting an effigy of his mother and placing it on a rock near a waterfall. Beside the effigy, he positioned a *murtekom* (long bamboo stick). He then proceeded to *Takartaji*'s place, where *Takartaji* was preparing the altar for the sacrifice. As planned, *Tani* inspected the altar and deceitfully nodded after a careful look before expressing false concerns about its construction. He warned *Takartaji* that mistakes in the altar could provoke malevolent spirits, bringing misery upon him and his family.

Frightened, *Takartaji* asked for *Tani*'s help. Pretending ignorance, *Tani* claimed he lacked the skill but suggested that his mother, an expert, could assist. *Takartaji* then ordered *Tayipako* (squirrel) to invite her. *Tani*, executing the final part of his plan, instructed *Tayipako* further, saying his mother was deaf and might not respond. If she did not, the squirrel was to use the *murtekom* placed nearby to get her attention.

Following *Tani*'s instructions, *Tayipako* searched for his mother and eventually found her seated on a rock near the edge of a powerful waterfall. As expected, she did not respond to his calls. Remembering *Tani*'s words, the squirrel gently nudged her with the *murtekom*. To his shock, she toppled over and plunged into the waterfall below. Stunned and terrified, the squirrel hesitated but finally returned to *Tani* to report the tragic incident.

Upon hearing the grim news, a heavy gloom settled over everyone. *Tani*, feigning outrage, unleashed furious curses on *Takartaji*, predicting doom for his family and the Universe. Shaken and guilt-ridden, *Takartaji* believed *Tani*'s mother had died due to his actions. Despite his attempts to appease *Tani*, the latter remained unmoved. Desperate, *Takartaji* pleaded for a way to make amends.

Tani eventually agreed to lift the curse but demanded ten *jobo* as compensation for his mother's life. This placed Takartaji in a dilemma, the *jobo* were meant for the sacrifice, and many guests had already been invited. Nevertheless, he reluctantly surrendered the bovines to Tani.

Having given away all his *jobos*, Takartaji still had to feed the guests gathered for the ceremony. He appointed a grasshopper and a lizard to oversee the meal service. Faced with a food shortage, the grasshopper severed its head, and the lizard cut meat from its leg. Thus, Takartaji managed to feed all the guests except for Dumpu (a deer) and Tani's dog, Kipu. Eventually, he served Kipu a *lote possum* (bones in *phrynium* leaves) and Dumpu an *aagya posum* (fermented beans). Kipu ate happily but felt that Dumpu was offended due to the quality of the food. Dumpu then kicked the food away and ran off. This incident gave rise to the Galo belief that deer feet smell like fermented soya beans. In doing so, Dumpu also spoiled Kipu's meal, angering the dog, who then chased after him.

The myth recounts that Kipu was Tani's dearest companion. Witnessing his dog pursuing Dumpu, Tani joined the chase (K. Bomjen, personal communication, 14 May 2020). As Dumpu traversed a location called Digo-Lura, inhabited by Mopin and her daughters, the deer accidentally spoiled the *itti* (a traditional dish prepared with rice paste), resulting in rice paste sticking to its feet and tail. The Galo believes this mishap explains the distinctive white patches observed on a deer's feet and tail.

During the chase, Kipu and Tani entered Digo-Lura. Witnessing Dumpu's actions, the Digo Ome (daughters of Mopin) wrongly blamed Kipu and captured him. When Tani arrived and was identified as Kipu's owner, he, too, was imprisoned. Despite Tani's pleas, both remained detained for a long time.

During this time, one of Mopin's daughters, Diyi-Tami, grew fond of Tani and devised a plan for his escape. She instructed him to catch a *Kirte papa/Bunyi karo* (bandicoot rat) and place it under his armpit so its decay would create a foul smell, faking illness. She provided him with a trap, and Tani followed the plan. Eventually, to avoid the blame for Tani's death, Mopin and her daughters released him. Before his departure, they accepted responsibility for his suffering and compensated him with paddy seeds.

Upon releasing Tani, Mopin instructed him: '*Amo aml em eki nyaru lo dinlik jigrela donyi moba be chaikuka, isi em sin tili lela isi duko lo palik jige re kula, lakche pelab chamabe lakbek pele be*' (R. Gadi, personal communication, 18 May 2020). She placed seeds in Kipu's ear pockets (Henry's pocket) and told Tani to take the right path and sow them in Donyi Moba. To this day, the Galo people believe that the Henry's pocket in dogs' ears was created for this very purpose, which is why dogs still have it (K. Bomjen, personal communication, 14 May 2020).

Unaware of proper farming practices, Tani sowed the seeds without clearing the forest. As a result, birds and rodents ate them before they could sprout. He returned to Digo-Lura, requesting more seeds and also asking for Piri-Tami, one of Mopin's daughters, in marriage. Though initially hesitant, Mopin agreed, believing that Piri-Tami's gift of cooking large quantities of rice from a few grains would benefit Tani.

While giving Tani seeds and Piri-Tami, Mopin instructed him to clear and burn the dense forests, and to erect altars to invoke blessings on her and her daughters. In doing so, Mopin blessed Tani and passed on the knowledge of cultivation. Tani followed the instructions carefully and was rewarded with a bumper harvest. To this day, the Galo people continue to invoke Mopin for *rilibongo* (blessing) in their fields.

However, Piri-Tami eventually left Tani due to his stubborn disobedience. Despite this, Tani thrived, gaining deep agricultural knowledge and marrying Diyi-Tami, marking the first successful marital union in Galo lore. Before this, Tani had married various life forms such as frogs, birds and plants. However, those relationships failed due to incompatibility; for instance, his marriage with *Ooko* (*phrynium* plant) ended when their son *Nipek* (leech) fed on Tani's blood. This episode also marked the beginning of Tani's settled life and the origin of the ritual practice of invoking Mopin for agricultural prosperity.

This rite, over time, gradually evolved into the vibrant Mopin festival, now celebrated by the Galo people with great pomp. As noted by Lego (2006), understanding the myth of Mopin reveals how her blessings, especially in cultivation, are deeply linked to a pivotal moment in Tani's life. The myth narrates how Mopin's guidance brought Tani abundant blessings and enlightenment in the art of agriculture. This knowledge transformed Tani's livelihood,

leading to bumper harvests and the foundation of a cultural tradition. What began as a sacred rite rooted in Tani's transformative journey gradually became the vibrant and culturally significant celebration now known as the Mopin festival.

Social metamorphosis

Until now, the primary focus of this study has been to understand the mythical origin of Mopin, emphasising its roots as a rite. However, exploring the metamorphosis of the rite into an indigenous festival is imperative in order to understand various social changes. Mopin, as discussed earlier, initially was a *Pintum*, a ritual traditionally conducted by a family to protect their fields and crops from famine following the *rokjin kognam* (chicken liver examination).

The transformation in the essence of this rite was instigated by a shift in mindset among a group of young student leaders of the Government Higher Secondary School, Aalo.⁴ Their significant role in transforming Mopin is a classic example of education as a tool of social change (Bourn 2022). Certain socio-economic conditions prevailed in Galo society during the last century, restricting the people from observing such rituals together as a community. These taboos and other socio-economic restrictions prompted the young leaders to rationally change the prevailing social rigidity without undermining the essence of Mopin.

This rational demeanour was rooted in recognising that the rite, characterised by intricate rituals, was confined to individual families or villages. The stimulant for change emerged as these forward-thinking student leaders sought to elevate Mopin from its localised and somewhat insular context, envisioning it as a communal celebration that could unite the larger community. This move marked a departure from the exclusivity of the ritual, broadening its scope to involve more extensive and diverse participation, ultimately paving the way for the transformation of Mopin into the festival that now resonates with the entire tribe and beyond.

Here, it is worth mentioning that the financial constraints faced by impoverished families and widows prevented their participation in Mopin, due to heavy expenses and social taboos. Recognising this issue, the student leaders perceived the necessity of transforming Mopin from a rite hitherto accessible only to a select few

to a more inclusive community celebration. Motivated by a desire to ensure that Mopin became a celebration accessible to all, regardless of their financial and social status, these leaders initiated a significant change in the essence of *Pintum*.

The institutionalisation of Mopin as a community festival began in 1966, following a series of formative meetings held in Aalo. The first was held on 12 January 1966, and a subsequent decisive meeting was convened on 12 March. During these discussions, alternative proposals, including Peka, a ritual traditionally reserved for men, were considered. However, these proposals were ultimately set aside due to concerns about inclusivity, particularly the limited scope for women's involvement. Finally, Mopin was unanimously chosen to manifest collective identity and participation, and 1 April was designated as the official day of celebration. The first formal celebration of Mopin thus took place on 1 April 1966, in Aalo, marking the beginning of its recognition as a unifying cultural event across the Galo community (Bagra 2016).

Mitigating socio-economic barriers, Mopin was selected by the student leaders not only for its inclusivity but also for its profound cultural symbolism. As the Galo goddess of agriculture, fertility and cultivation, akin to Demeter, Ninhursag or Osiris in ancient agrarian traditions, Mopin embodies values central to livelihood and communal wellbeing. Her veneration through public celebration appealed to a broad social base, reinforcing the festival's significance. The coordinated efforts of forward-thinking individuals committed to social cohesion and cultural revitalisation ensured that 1966 marked the inaugural year of Mopin as a formal, community festival for the Galo people (Bagra 2016).

However, it is to be noted that the early institutionalisation of Mopin was not merely the result of generational freedom or detachment from traditional authority. Rather, it reflected a deliberate and contextually informed engagement with evolving cultural and political landscapes. It cannot be denied that those involved acted with a degree of autonomy, but their motivations extended beyond personal liberation; a pragmatic vision of inclusivity and cultural adaptation guided them (L. Ete, personal communication, 22 May 2024).

In post-colonial India, which was changing quickly, these actors aimed to reinterpret regional customs in ways

that complemented the larger ideals of the tribe's identity and community involvement. Their reconfiguration of the Mopin community festival was both culturally sensitive and strategically integrative, allowing the Galo community to assert its heritage while engaging with national discourses of modernity and secular celebration. Far from being freer than traditional custodians, these reformers occupied a critical liminal space, balancing respect for tradition with responsiveness to contemporary aspirations for collective belonging.

The venue for the celebration of Mopin was chosen at the town club, located on the site of the present-day Police colony, Aalo town. However, the decision as to whether to incorporate the chicken liver examination into the celebration became a topic of extensive debate. This debate among the community members arose from concerns about religious taboos and ritual propriety. Any rite conducted without the customary divination was deemed taboo during those times. Some individuals opposed *jobo* (Mithun) sacrifice without consulting omens.⁵ Despite this, the members reached a consensus in favour of transforming Mopin into a festival without haruspicy because the omen examination hinders the wider participation of the community. Another significant challenge arose when no priest initially agreed to conduct the rituals due to prevailing scepticism and deep-rooted superstitions about performing ceremonies without customary divination. Amid this uncertainty, a community member courageously volunteered to lead the rituals, marking a pivotal moment in the festival's evolution (Figure 2).⁶ Similarly, another member took on the role of the first *Pingi Neri*, the traditional host responsible for the concluding celebration of Mopin and continued in this capacity for four consecutive years.⁷ Over time, the community observed that neither the officiant nor the host suffered any misfortune due to their participation. This growing awareness helped to dispel fears and taboos, gradually shifting perceptions and fostering a more inclusive and confident embrace of Mopin as a community celebration.

In 1967, the construction of a *Dere* (community building) at Belumghat, present-day Puakgumin, marked a significant milestone in establishing a permanent venue for celebrating Mopin. During this gathering, a unanimous resolution was passed to fix 5 April as the official date for the annual observance of Mopin, strengthening its status as an indigenous and unifying cultural festival. The meeting also featured a spirited debate over whether to



Figure 2
The First Central Mopin Festival Celebration in 1966.
Source: Image reproduced from *Souvenir Dwgo Yamo*, by Limin Kamum, with due acknowledgement to the source.

incorporate *rokjin kognam* (haruspicy) into the celebration. In earlier times, when Mopin was observed as a rite, a *nyibo* (priest) would examine a chicken's liver, especially its veins and arteries, after invoking the spirits of Mopin, Pinku and Pinte, particularly when a household faced issues such as crop failure due to weather problems or pest outbreaks. Based on this examination, the *nyibo* would determine whether or not a Mopin-Pintum ritual was to be performed by the affected family. While some participants at the meeting supported reintroducing this practice, others firmly opposed it, stressing that the aim was to establish Mopin as an inclusive, public event across Galo regions. They cautioned that reviving ritual divination might hinder broader participation and dilute the festival's inclusive vision.

Interpreting social significance

Cudny (2014) aptly observes that festivals reflect a broad understanding of human culture. Mopin, as an indigenous festival, reflects several aspects of cultural and traditional life. Deeply rooted in people's customs and traditions, it shows the inheritance of tangible and intangible culture as a collective achievement from generation to generation. It helps immensely in understanding the Galo culture and tradition.

Mopin was not always celebrated as an indigenous festival. Over the years, the tribe witnessed a powerful social change that transformed a rite into an indigenous festival. Notably, the Mopin myth reveals the transition from nomadic to settled agricultural life with the development of certain marriage customs. Hence, it is a repository of tribal

histories, wisdom, cultural identity, spiritual significance and adaptive strategies. Through these narratives, tribes remember their past and draw strength and knowledge to face future challenges.

The study strongly questioned the whole notion of the eternal patriarchal family and the natural inadequacy and subordination of women. The myth shows that matrilineal genealogy starts with Jimi, who created Tani. The contemporary Galo society, however, traces its genealogy from Jimi but counts its kinship genealogy from Tani, forgetting the genealogical line beyond Tani. Correspondingly, Doye (2018) observes that every clan claims and traces its origin from Jimi *Ane* but primarily counts the kinship genealogy from Rini/Tani (first man). It shows the shift from matrilineality to patrilineality. As such, questioning the existing patriarchy opens up a new understanding of women's position in Galo's history.

An immediate consequence of this transformative process is discernible in the robust establishment of a distinct social identity for the Galo tribe within the broader context of other tribes in the state. Notably, among the Tani tribes, the Galo tribe distinguished itself as the first community generalising a festival for the masses, thereby challenging traditional norms. This departure from conventional practices not only opened the minds of individuals within the Galo tribe but also influenced neighbouring tribes, prompting them to contemplate the initiation of similar community festivals as a potent marker of their tribal identity (K. Omo, personal communication, 15 September 2020).



Figure 3
A woman offering *poka* (rice beer) at the Mopin altar, 1 April 2024.
Source: Photo by Limin Kamum.

Although the people externally initiated the transformation of Mopin, the entire process seemed natural. Howell (2018) comments that such a process of cultural adaptation and evolution, where people adapt to socio-economic and environmental change, is considered natural. The examination illustrates the meticulous steps taken by the Galo people to transform Mopin into an indigenous festival, overcoming various challenges and societal taboos entrenched in the late period. Establishing a dedicated venue, making significant decisions in meetings, and engaging in proactive endeavours to secure financial support all played crucial roles in elevating Mopin from a rite to a widely embraced community festival.

Myths and Mopin: shaping social change

The Galo believe that their socio-cultural and religious traditions are direct inheritances from Tani, highlighting their vibrant culture as inseparable facets of a shared identity. Their cultures are reflected in primordial markers of a tribal society, including myths, legends, language, rites, arts and social structures. These markers constitute the existential foundation of tribal life. Over time, these have evolved into distinctive forms and shaped the collective identity. For the Galo, Mopin embodies these markers, serving as a dynamic and enduring expression of their cultural and religious heritage.

The transition marked a broader cultural shift that strengthened social relations and fostered community cohesion, positioning Mopin as an agent of socialisation. While evolving from a rite, the festival has retained core elements of Galloic customs and traditions. It continues to resonate with the social memory, supporting cultural heritage through collective efforts. As such, Mopin remains a vital part of the cultural legacy, cementing its role as a festival that preserves traditional values and sustains the continuity of customs and identity.

Studying Mopin and its associated oral traditions helps us to understand various stages of cultural metamorphosis. The discovery of seeds in Donyi Moba, which led to the beginning of agriculture, can be considered an event parallel to the Neolithic Revolution. Childe (1936), coining the term, states that the revolution was a series of agricultural revolutions which had a transformative impact on the communities.

Myths are clear that Tani neither had a settled life nor knew the art of cultivation. However, Tani's desire to own

bovines and his companionship with a dog reveal that, by this time, the ancestors of the Galo practised a rudimentary form of domestication of animals. Another critical point is that, in the entire oral narrative of Takartaji's *Dorri Panam* ceremony, there is no mention of rice as a meal. Nor does the myth mention any other human settlements and humans except for Tani, suggesting that the social structure was one where people were nomadic and had transient settlements. Nonetheless, the discovery of paddy seeds in Donyi-Lura reshaped the subsistence strategies, settlement and social structure. The oral tradition indicates that Tani's sedentary life began with agriculture after his sojourn at Dwgo-Lura (P. Kamum, personal communication, 13 May 2020).

Decoding the events in myths, the discovery of paddy in Donyi Moba and Tani's marriage with Mopin's daughter, the receipt of paddy seeds and learning about cultivation revealed the history of the transitional phase of the tribe. With agriculture, a source of reliable food was established, which helped the population to grow healthy and saw the emergence of permanent settlements. To this day, to sustain themselves, the tribe practise *Jhum* cultivation (slash and burn agriculture) which they firmly believe to be an acquired heritage from Mopin.⁸

Here, the significance of inheriting intangible heritage can be understood from the fact that it plays an essential role in revealing the emergence of the first agricultural villages within the tribal histories. In the same way that archaeological shards of evidence help to identify the early Neolithic villages such as Jericho and Catal Huyuk during the early stages of civilisation (Singh 2009), oral traditions help to locate places such as Digo Lura and Donyi Moba as early agricultural settlements of the Galo people.

Careful study of the myth shows that before Tani's nuptial relationship with Mopin's daughter, there was no evidence of Tani's patrilocal practice in marriage. Myths and other oral traditions are almost silent on this. Tani's marriage with Piri Tami and his leaving Digo Lura with Tani marks the first patrilocal movement after marriage noted in the oral traditions, in the absence of conventional source materials, to reconstruct the early social norms of the tribe.

While evolutionary approaches have faced significant criticism for their linear and often reductive interpretations of social development, they continue to offer heuristic value if applied with cultural specificity and contextual

nuance (Carneiro 2018). When applied cautiously, avoiding too much generalisation, they can illuminate patterns in transforming social structures and belief systems. Recent scholarship has moved beyond rigid unilinear models to incorporate more flexible, multilinear or co-evolutionary frameworks that account for diversity, contingency and cultural agency in societal change (Steward 1973). These developments have helped to rehabilitate certain aspects of evolutionary theory by integrating insights from archaeology, anthropology, ethnology, ethnohistory and historical ecology, offering a more dynamic understanding of social evolution (Childe 1951).

The socio-cultural development of the Galo tribe corresponds, to a degree, with the stages of social evolution as framed within the evolutionary paradigm. Evolutionists hypothesise that the first stage of human society was matriarchal, with matrilineal and matrilineal as its essence (Morgan 1877). They portray early human society as gynocentric, with a social mother and a leading woman ruling the horde (Sankrityayan 1943). In the context of the Galo tribe, Jimi *Ane* (mother), the Supreme mother creator, and Mopin perfectly resemble the social mother and the leading woman.

The comparative study of contemporary Galo society makes it more precise. Present-day Galo society follows the norms of patriarchy, where patrilineal and patrilocal are the cornerstones. However, if we analyse the cosmogonic genealogy of the tribe, their lineages start from Jimi, a female figure. The names of the children also follow her name. The point here is that the present-day Galo society follows the patronym (keeping children's names from the last syllable of the father's name). The cosmogenic genealogy, however, depicts the tribe at a point in time when it had a gynocentric, matrilineal and matronym system, as is evident from the fact that the clans still trace genealogies to Jimi but count their clan genealogical line from Tani.

Mopin's social position with her daughters in Digo Lura perfectly manifests the elements of gynocentrism. Mopin, with her daughters, took a man (Tani) captive without the help of any man. Digo Lura depicts an ancient stage of the Galloic society where mother rule reigned supreme. Further, Mopin's position corresponds with that of a leading woman or social mother as theorised by the evolutionists. In Digo Lura, it is explicit from myths that Mopin has the highest authority. The myth also confirms that the matrilineal tradition was in vogue, as her

daughters' names were kept after her name (e.g. *Pinku* and *Pinte*, from *Mopin*). Thus, in line with the evolutionary theory, the kinship system of this stage of the Galo society was based on matri-sib (matrilineal principles). The social system in the Digo Lura clearly depicts matri-sib, a female clan in the words of evolutionists.

According to the evolutionary school, another notable condition of early human society is that there was no regulation of marriage and sexual behaviours. In short, humans then did not invent the tradition of incest. As Engels (1902) perceives, incest is an invention. An oral tradition related to the life of Tani throws light on this tradition, what we now call incest. It narrates that, failing to have any life partner, Tani entered into a sexual relationship with his daughters. Referring to this phase of Tani's life, M. Ete (2021) in work comments, 'In the absence of his wife, Tani suffered a lot for a long time and tried to have a conjugal life with his daughter Nisi' [11].

An important thing to note here is that due to the paucity of data, mainly archaeological and written, a comprehensive study of how the Galo society evolved

through various stages cannot be carried out. For instance, the materials indicating the factors responsible for the beginning of agriculture are far from clear. However, the rich oral traditions of the tribe aid immensely in minimising such problems by presenting themselves as a cicerone. Therefore, one has to rely on oral traditions and carefully prise open the historical data embedded in them (Thapar 1992).

Narrating the myth today: performances and reception during Mopin

Mopin myths are articulated through various forms, including *Popir* (lore), *Nyaan Kabnam* (lamentation songs), *Mopin popir-nunam* (folk songs and dances) and modern musical performances. These narratives are primarily conveyed by *Nyibo*, *Boo* (assistant priests), and elders with expertise in traditional knowledge. The entire community actively participates alongside *Nyibo* and *Boo* in performances such as *Mopin Popir*, *Popir-Nunam* and *Nyaan Kabnam*, preserving the ritual and narrative structure of the myth.

The community also engages through modern interpretations, performing contemporary songs and dances such as *Jimi ane mi*, *Asi Abir akum toh Mopin Mola ju*, *Git-te logli*, *Popir anu re*, *Mopin e hilo adu ku* and *Silo nyirju be*, all based on Mopin myths and legends. Some groups further express reverence through stage dramas that depict episodes such as *Takartaji's Dorri Panam*, the advent of *Mopin* and *Anyi Pinku-Pinte*, associated with agricultural life. Others engage with more casual interest, reflecting a spectrum of responses demonstrating continuity and evolving cultural participation modes. The following are some excerpts of Mopin myths articulated through folklore and folk music.

1. Dumpu Kipu (Yili-Bongo Lanam)⁹

*'He Popire
Abo Le Tani Le
Tani Le Aken Le
Yai Lo Buko
Yala lo Buko
Ai em Komdu
Tumento Komdu
Ako am pora
Gamen te name
Penyir go Mamti
Spemago Namti
Dusuk go nune*



Figure 4
Mopin *dipeh* (altar) featuring representations of Anyi Pinku and Pinte, 1 April 2024.
Source: Photo by Limin Kamum.

Numin be mumge
Amen na toma
Kasenma toma
Yai le tode
Tode le rene
Abba Tani
Te yite budum
Takar te yira
Taji te yira
Yame ne Gadda
Doryi te hite
Murte ge Kome
Kipu ge ledoge
Dumpu ge ledoge'

Explanation: Abo (father) Tani was catching fish using an *edir* (bamboo trap) when *Hirum Pensi* (bat) informed him that *Takar Taji* was preparing to sacrifice ten *Mithun* (*hite rego*). Guided by *Tode Rene* (bird), he set out for Takar Taji's place. To disrupt the ritual, Tani faked his mother's death using a decoy and deceived Takar Taji into giving him ten *hobo/Jobo* (*Bos frontalis*) as compensation. Without *mithuns* for the feast, Takar Taji relied on the self-sacrifice of a grasshopper and a lizard. When *Dumpu* (deer) took offence and fled because of food, Tani's dog *Kipu* chased him to *Digo-Lura*, where Mopin's daughters captured both Kipu and Tani. With *Diyi-Tami's* help, Tani feigned illness using a *Kirte Papa* (rat) to escape. Before releasing him, Mopin gave him paddy seeds and instructed him to sow them in *Donyi Moba*, hidden in Kipu's ear folds.

2. Popir-e-tenu¹⁰

'Popir e tenu, popir e tenu
Tari ome ngunu
Tangum ome ngunu
Pinku ome ngunu
Pinte ome ngunu
Lije la dodi
Lipin la dodi
Hirmo la dodi
Molo la dodi
Lije nam nagum
Lipin nam nagum
Lije nam nyigum
Lipin nam nyigum
Lije nam lote
Lipin nam lote

Menjik go konyik
Menkok go konyik
Boi nam rimin
Bolo nam rimin
Nyigam go konyik
Nyite go konyik
Kero go yili
Take go Yili'

Explanation: Here, women are portrayed as the daughters of Pinku and Pinte (daughters of Mopin). They are instructed to collect a *ginsi* (basket) of *dosi-lipin* (special stones that are small, yet heavy) and place it in the granary. This will invoke Mopin's blessings, ensuring a bountiful harvest and granaries replete with paddy, millet and cucumber seeds. It is also believed to bestow wisdom, knowledge and wealth upon the community, and to enable fertility among the barren.

3. Jimi Ane Mii¹¹

'Jimi Ane Mii
Digo tolo dumrik lo
Hago tolo dumrik lo
Jimi tolo rigu lo
Moji ne Mopin ne, Nelo be rulen be yu
Moji ne Mopin ne, Neko be daglen be yu
Aaiyeh embe nene be dulen pala
Jimi ge Mioir, Mipir ge Pirku
Pirteh emla opar em paren be yu
Jimi me mimo, Mimo ge Moji
Mopin emla oper em parlen be yu'

Explanation: This folk music, based on Mopin mythology, explains the creation of Mopin by Jimi, which has already been discussed in detail in the preceding pages in the section titled 'Mythological backdrop'.

Conclusion

In the absence of a script and any other conventional sources to reconstruct the early history of the tribe, elements of intangible heritage that have passed down through generations of the Galo people have become reliable sources and a crucial link to the earliest societal conditions of the tribe. These elements provide important insights about the traces of early cultures, but meticulous examination is required. However, early

Eurocentric historians and the positivist school of history often disregarded oral traditions as reliable historical sources due to their propensity to change over time (Langlois & Seignobos, 1898). The criticism of oral tradition as an unreliable source of history is not wholly justified because other prominent sources of history (archaeology and written sources) share similar restrictions (Ki-Zerbo, 1981). Such wholesale rejection risks the loss of valuable historical knowledge embedded within these traditions, therefore, tantamount to an act of 'throwing the baby out with the bathwater.'

The evolution of Mopin is a logical and intentional change that broadens the use of a ritual beyond a specific family to include a larger social component in a larger social space. Imbued with a corpus of oral narratives, Mopin is firmly entrenched in the cultural traditions of the Galo community. Cultural memory of the tribe is unified by these oral traditions, which show tribal interpretations of cosmological beginnings, flora and fauna, spiritual powers and the introduction of agriculture. In order to preserve tribal knowledge and historical memory, these stories are told by priests and elders throughout the festival.

Despite early apprehension and suspicion that they may attract misfortune, particularly concerning the removal of the customary ceremonies such as haruspicy, these worries have largely subsided. The Galo community has accepted Mopin as a festival, acknowledging it as a vibrant representation of cultural continuity and identity. In essence, Mopin stands as a vital custodian of Galo cultural heritage, an ever-evolving window into tribal life that continues to embody the complexity, resilience and

richness of the Galo worldview.

Engagements with elders and youth reveal a shared perspective on cultural safeguarding, particularly protecting Mopin's essence from the erosive pressures of socio-cultural change. The preservation of Mopin's intangible heritage must coexist with the capacity of the community to reinterpret tradition in response to contemporary contexts (K. Bomjen, personal communication, 17 May 2020). Collaborative frameworks that strengthen the community's position as the main steward of its cultural heritage and elevate local voices are the most effective way to accomplish this goal.

Mopin has also emerged as a rapidly expanding phenomenon within Galo society in the era of modernisation and globalisation. It plays a pivotal role in preserving indigenous traditions and strengthening cultural identity while adapting to contemporary contexts. The evolving landscape of Mopin reveals the community's resilience and responsiveness to change, maintaining cultural roots while engaging with broader societal shifts.

Therefore, researchers, practitioners and outsiders, including tourists, must engage with communities in ways that uphold cultural sensitivity and ethical responsibility. Recognising traditional knowledge systems and securing free, prior and informed consent is essential. Collaborative, participatory methods should guide all stages of research, ensuring community involvement throughout. External actors must avoid essentialising or simplifying cultural practices and act with care around sacred or sensitive traditions. 🍷

ENDNOTES

1. The myths and legends referenced here have been primarily collected through oral interviews conducted during ethnographic fieldwork. These accounts were gathered from a *nyibo* (priest) across various locations in the Galo-inhabited regions, with informed consent and following ethical research practices.
2. This mythological account regarding the creation of the Universe is based on narratives collected during fieldwork (2020–2024), as recounted by Mopin priestess Ragi Gadi during interviews.
3. The myth *Tani la Takartaji* was collected through oral interviews during fieldwork, as narrated by former Mopin priest Kirko Bomjen.
4. The individuals' names (Dagi Riba, Gumken Bagra, Yimar Riba, Tomar Ete, Tadak Gara) are cited from *Dwgo Yamo*, a 2016 souvenir published by the Central Mopin Committee for the Golden Jubilee of Mopin. This official publication publicly honours contributors to the festival and is widely recognised within the Galo community. The names appear in this publication in the context of community recognition for their contributions and thus reflect a shared cultural memory and public consensus. The citation of their names in this paper underscores that collective recognition does not involve any exclusive claims or potentially divisive representations.
5. Personal interview with Horsen Ete, conducted on 24 May 2024, in Arunachal Pradesh.
6. Personal interview with Horsen Ete, conducted on 24 May 2024, in Arunachal Pradesh. See also Bagra (2016, 25), where the author informs that Gotu Bagra volunteered to perform the first Central Mopin Festival Celebration ritual in 1966.
7. Bagra (2016, 25) discusses how Kore Bagra volunteered to be the first Pingi-Neri (host) of the first Mopin celebration.
8. Among the Galo tribe, the cultivation of *Jhum* is locally known as *tumpe riki*.
9. Mopin lore *Dumpu Kipu* (*Yili-Bongo Lanam*), containing the myth about the origin of Mopin, as narrated by *Nyibo* Karmin Doji at Aalo on 16 April 2024.
10. Mopin lore, *Popir e Tenu Nyibo*, as narrated by Yakar Gadi at Rigo Village on 4 June 2024.
11. Jimi Ane Mii is a popular folk song composed and sung by Jomnya Siram. The lyrics were collected from Bommar Kamum at Lido Village on 22 May 2020.

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