



The Nyodu Ngammi Hinam Practice Among the Galos of Arunachal

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Abstract

This article explores the cultural, judicial and spiritual significance of the *Nyodu* (the tiger's jaw in Galo language) in the traditional belief system of the Galo community of Arunachal Pradesh. Imbued with tiger's ferocious spirit, *Nyodu* is considered as a sacred object in Galo society that helps regulate social order. The article traces the kinship between man and tiger and examines the consequences of killing a tiger among the Galo community. It documents the purification rituals and taboos following a tiger killing. The article further analyses the practice of *Nyodu Ngammi Hinam* (the ritual of tiger jaw biting), along with the social prohibitions and spiritual consequences it entails. The study highlights the *Nyodu's* role as a powerful intersection of spirituality, morality, customary justice and social order in Galo society.

Keywords: Customary justice system of Galo, collective responsibility, man tiger ancestry, Galo mythology, *Nyodu*- tiger's jaw.

Introduction

Among the Galo community of Arunachal Pradesh, tiger is more than just a wild beast of the forest. It is regarded as spiritual kin and a moral witness. The tiger is feared and respected not only as a ferocious animal, but also as a powerful spirit after its death. This profound relationship between Galos and tigers is embodied in the beliefs regarding *Nyodu* (the tiger's jaw).

The *Nyodu* is far more than a trophy or an ornament to be adorned. It is a revered object believed to house the spirit of the beast.¹ The *Nyodu* for Galos serves as an ultimate device to ensure lawfulness rooted firmly in Galo cosmology. From elaborate purification rituals performed upon killing a tiger to the strict governing taboos of its possession, tiger's jaw plays an important role in maintaining morality, justice and social order within the Galo community.

¹ An excerpt from an interview from an interview with Kamsi, Remo, Galo priest, Doyor

village, West Siang district (A.P) by the author on 5th Jan. 2026.

Methodology

This study has been conducted in seven Galo villages of West Siang and Leparada districts of Arunachal Pradesh namely Kabu, Doyor, Angu, Bam, Nyodu, Tadin, and Jirdin. Both primary and secondary materials have been used for the article. Intensive field works have been conducted in different villages for the collection of data. Voice recorders, video cameras and journals were used to gather data. The target interviewees for the data collection were Priests, village elders and intellectuals of the Galo community. Before conducting the interviews, the participants were made fully aware of the purpose of the interview. Only after obtaining the full consent of the participants, did the author proceed. After the collection of data, a thorough analysis was made to craft the article.

Nyodu- The tiger Jaw

Galo people believe that the spirit of tiger remains attached to *Nyodu* (which is kept by the hunter as a souvenir of the hunt). It is considered sacred and is usually adorned on the *Hobuk* (scabbard) as a symbol of bravery. However, it must not be regarded it as an ordinary accessory. Keeping a *Nyodu* comes with a set of very strict rules due to its spiritual significance.

The females are not allowed to touch a tiger's jaw. It is believed that if a woman touches the *Nyodu*, it may bring her misfortunes.² The jaw of the fiercest predator, is believed to house the ferocious spirit of the beast. The Galos dares not lie in front of tiger jaw. The Galos believes that lying before *Nyodu* invites the wrath of the beast's spirit, resulting in misfortune. It is regarded as all watching eye and an all-hearing ear, silently judging and waiting for an

² An excerpt from an interview from an interview with Nyodu, Hemme Basar, Senior villager, Nyodu village, Leparada district (A.P) by the author on 14th Jan 2026.

³ An excerpt from an interview from an interview with Angu, Tuken, Senior villager,

opportunity to punish the sinner.³ According to Galo belief, a *Nyodu* must be kept at the cleanest place possible. Hence, it is kept at the *Bago* (the corner to the main entrance in a Galo house), the cleanest corner according to Galo beliefs. The place where the *Nyodu* is kept must remain ritually clean; otherwise it may bring great adversity to the household and anyone who pollutes it. Those observing *Arr Rinam* (ritual taboo) of any kind are not allowed to enter the *Bago* as it believed to pollute the space.⁴



Fig.1 A *Nyodu* adorned on a scabbard.

The belief behind the closeness between Galo and Tiger

The Galos believe that humans and tigers share same ancestor *Hichi* or *Sichi* (Mother Earth). *Rini/Tani* and *Rinyo /Honyo* (the tiger) lived like brothers. Over time, however, their paths diverged. The different between them became stark. Tani developed an inclination towards domestic life and settled life- a more civilized way of life. But *Rinyo* on the other hand became increasingly wild and savage. They decided to go separate ways, *Rini* chose

Angu village, West Siang district (A.P) by the author on 20th Jan 2026.

⁴ An excerpt from an interview from an interview with Loya, Lijum, Gao Bura, Kabu village, West Siang district (A.P) by the author on 3rd Feb 2026.

civilization and Rinyo retrieved to the jungle to continue the life of a predatory wanderer.⁵

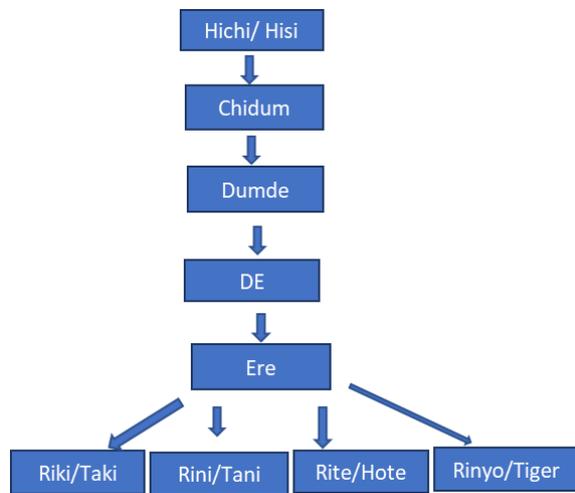


Fig. 2 The genealogical diagram showing the origin of Rini/Tani and Rinyo/Tiger from *Hichi* (Mother Earth). Source Remo Kamsi, *Nyibo* (shaman) from Doyor village, West Siang district Arunachal Pradesh.

Killing a tiger is seen as equivalent to killing a human which is considered as the gravest sin in Galo society. If someone kills a tiger whether intentionally or accidentally, it becomes compulsory for the person to go through a very demanding penance ritual in order to cleanse himself of the sin he has committed and to protect himself and his family from the wrath of the guardian spirits of the jungle as well as from the vengeful spirit of the tiger itself.

It is believed that the spirit of a tiger is so powerful that if the penance rituals are not performed properly, it will destroy the hunter and his entire family.⁶

Rituals performed upon killing a tiger

When a man kills a tiger, he is banned from taking parts in social activities until he fulfils all the prescribed penance rituals. He

cannot even enter his own house before cleansing himself. He stays at a the *Dere* (the community hall) of the village during the cleansing period and is barred from celebrating Mopin- the main festival of Galos (Sharma, 2020).

The entire village participate in the cleansing ceremony. The male villagers jump over the tiger's corpse signifying the beast has been conquered by man. They also perform a dramatic dance in which the villagers form a human chain and make war cry during the performance to display strength. One man dresses up as a tiger and pretend to attack the human chain but no one allows him to touch the chain, symbolizing the human dominance over the beast. All these actions are performed to let the spirit of the beast feel defeated, so that he departs for the spirit world sparing the hunter, his family and the village.

The hunter, during the cleansing period, is dressed in woman's attire so to disguise him and keep him hidden from the vengeful spirit of the tiger during the period of cleansing ritual. The shaman performs rituals and communicates to the beasts' spirit that the act of killing was unintentional. Had it not been the beast coming out of his habitat and posed a threat to the people, would not have killed it. That it was the destiny's play that such incident has happened. The shaman also offers sacrifices to compensate for his life. At the end of ceremony there is one final ritual called *Papu Palin* (which means the final cleansing ritual in Galo language) after which the villagers are allowed to go to their fields and also can continue with their normal life.

Although the villagers continue their life as it was, the hunter and his household continue to observe the *Arr Rinam* (observing taboos) as long as the hunter lives. For the one

⁵ An excerpt from an interview from an interview with Kamsi, Remo, Galo priest, Doyor village, West Siang district (A.P) by the author on 5th Jan. 2026.

⁶ An excerpt from an interview from an interview with Nyodu, Toli, Senior villager, Nyodu village, Leparada district (A.P) by the author on 20th Jan. 2026

full year, hunter and his family are forbidden from taking part on any social activities. He is forbidden from eating *Iti/ Ite* (rice cake), *Takey/ Take* (ginger) (Doye 2025) and all the clawed animal's meat including chicken for the rest of his life.⁷

It is believed that the failure to observe these rituals may result in serious misfortunes in form of uncurable diseases and untimely deaths of the family members. Even after the death of the hunter, he is denied of the ritual of *Iti Tinnam* (smearing of rice powder paste) on the face of the hunter's face which is considered as a symbol of a glorious life lived (Kamsi 2026).

The initiatives taken by the government of India such as The Wildlife Protection Act of 1972 along with the other conservation laws have curtailed tiger hunting in the states of Arunachal Pradesh. The enforcement of laws along with the social taboos, have helped in checking tiger hunting and reducing it to near zero in the region. Therefore, Nyodu -the tiger's jaw seen in the present time are not newly acquired but rather family heirlooms passed down within the family through generations.

Nyodu Ngammi Hinam (Biting on the tiger jaw)

According Galo mythology, Nyodu was the very device that ended the life of their progenitor, Abo Tani. Tani and *Rinyo* (tiger) had an once pact made that Tani would never utter *Rinyo's* name; if he did, the *Rinyo* would come for Tani. One day after so many years, Tani accidentally mentioned *Rinyo's* name and hearing that even from afar, *Rinyo* comes out from the jungle, tricked Tani and Killed him.

The Galos believe that the jaw which took the life of their forefather, holds the power to destroy his descendants. For this the reason, the act of af falsely swearing on a Nyodu is considered a grave act of seriousness.⁸

The act of biting on the tiger jaw which is known as *Nyodu Ngammi Hinam* (Nyodu, the tiger's jaw and *Ngammi Hinam* in Galo means to bite one after the other). It is considered as the ultimate vindication of one's innocence against when all sorts of methods fail.⁹ A person who falsely swears innocence upon biting the tiger jaw is believed as an invitation to the spirit of the tiger to devour him. It is a firm belief among the Galos that the consequence of false oath on Nyodu is immediate. It is considered a very serious act which jeopardises not only the life of the persons involved, but also the well-being of their families. Once the act of *Nyodu Ngammi Hinam* is performed, their entire family gets involved. Both the he families of the enter in a loop of *Arr Rimi Hinam* (mutual lifelong taboos). This may also extend to generations. The families can never eat from each-other's houses or establish any kind of relations. The violation of the taboos are believed to invite the wrath of the beast's spirit which may result in a range of adversities including incurable diseases and unnatural deaths within their families.¹⁰

The act of *Nyodu Ngammi Hinam* is performed in front of the whole *Keba* (the village council) and a *Nyibo/ Nyibu* (shaman). The shaman acts as the spiritual witness. The shaman is considered as a mediator between the human and the spirit realms (Jillen et al., 2025, p. 344). The *Nyibo* chants mantras to evoke the spirit of the beast asking him to spare the

⁷ An excerpt from an interview from an interview with Loya, Lijum, Gao Bura, Kabu village, West Siang district (A.P) by the author on 3rd Feb 2026.

⁸ An excerpt from an interview from an interview with Kamsi, Remo, Galo priest, Doyor village, West Siang district (A.P) by the author on 5th Jan. 2026.

⁹ An excerpt from an interview from an interview with Nyodu, Hemme Basar, Senior villager, Nyodu village, Leparada district (A.P) by the author on 14th Jan 2026.

¹⁰ An excerpt from an interview from an interview with Loya, Lijum, Gao Bura, Kabu village, West Siang district (A.P) by the author on 3rd Feb 2026.

innocent and punish the culprit by taking his soul.

In some occasions people, when met with serious conflicts, performs the Nyodu Ngammi Hinam among themselves without even seeking the knowledge or the intervention of keba and the shaman. This, according to Galo belief poses a serious threat to the wellbeing concerned individuals as well as to the innocent members of their families. The act of performing Nyodu Ngammi Hinam without the knowledge of the Keba is strictly prohibited. It has been officially banned by the Galo society in the year 2017 (Bogum-Boka, 2017, p.30).

Conclusion

For the Galo community of Arunachal Pradesh, the tiger is far more than just a wild beast. It is a sacred ancestral relative worthy of profound reverence. It is evident in the elaborate penance rituals performed upon killing a tiger. The penance ritual and lifelong restrictions imposed on the tiger slayer does not just confine to the person concerned, but to the entire family, making its effects much more serious. It makes people more careful and respectful toward animals.

The practice of Nyodu Ngammi Hinam is not merely a religious practice but a moral institution. It instils moral accountability and reinforces collective responsibility within the community. It also reflects the deep spiritual bond between the Galos and the tiger, contributing to the ecological balance and harmony with the nature. These practices testify to the enduring connection of the Galos to their ancestral legacy.

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