



The Animist Way of Life of the Galos of Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract

Animism is one of the earliest systems of belief, a worldview which guided the earliest human societies. It helped them understand and establishing a deep relationship with the world around. This article examines the animistic lifestyle of the Galos of Arunachal Pradesh by highlighting ethical and ecological framework guiding their everyday life. It also explores the Galo concept of nature as a sacred realm shared by all living, non-living and the spiritual beings. Through an analysis of Galo culture, the article attempts to demonstrate how animistic lifestyle of the Galos foster moral responsibility and accountability in their society which lead to a life of balance and harmony in the natural world. In the contemporary scenario, where the world is facing ecological crisis, the Galo worldview offers an alternative way for the harmonious coexistence of human and nature which tested and supported by the time and indigenous wisdom.

Keywords: Galo, Animism, Indigenous Wisdom, Belief System, Social Norms.

Introduction

Tucked away in the lap of nature at the Eastern Himalayas, away from the hustle of the world, lives a mystical community of Galo. Galo is one of the major tribal communities of Arunachal Pradesh with the population of 1,12,272 (according to the 2011 census) (Pegu & Barua 172). The community is scattered throughout the state, but the main settlement is found in the districts of West Siang, Leparada and Lower Siang districts of Arunachal Pradesh. They belong to the Mongoloid race (Kardong

49). Donyi Polo is their main religion which is animistic in nature. They believe themselves to be the descendants of Abo Tani, the first human according to the Galo belief. Mopin an agriculturally based festival is the main festival of the Galo community which is celebrated annually on 5th of the *Luki polo* (the month of April in Galo calendar). They are known for their friendly and openhearted nature and their warm hospitality towards the guests (Times Entertainment).

Animism

Before the modern religions took over the world, animism has been the way of life in the early human societies. Some scholars argue that it is the most primitive form of religion which evolved during the course of time into the modern religions of the present. Before diving deeper into the subject of Animism, let us understand the concept. The term *Animism* is driven from the Latin word *animus* or *anima* meaning "soul" or "breath" referring to that which empowers or gives life to something. The term was coined by Sir Edward Burnett Taylor, an English anthropologist, in his Book *Primitive Culture* (1871). According to Taylor, animism is the belief that not only humans but other entities such as plants, animals, rivers and other phenomena possess soul (Taylor 417-427). It is a worldview or a lifestyle where humans are seen as a part of broader community of living, non-living and supernatural beings as interconnected and deserving of respect. Graham Harvey in his work *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (2005), frames his view on animism as a way of life/worldview in which humans and non-humans (plants, animals, rocks and elements) live in a network of relationships rather than inert objects.

Animism is a belief system woven around the concept of maintaining balance and respecting the world around. It is not necessarily a religion, but a belief that all beings are connected be it living or non-living (Leigh, 2022, para 2). In other words, animism is a lifestyle oriented towards a life of balanced and harmonious coexistence.

Methodology

This study has been conducted in six Galo villages namely Angu, Doyor, Jirdin, Pokto, Kadi and Bam Chili of Leparada and West Siang districts of Arunachal Pradesh. Both primary and Secondary data are used for this paper. For

collecting data, intensive field works have been conducted in different villages. For secondary data, books journals, and internet sources have been used. After collecting of the data, a thorough analysis was made to craft the article.

Galo and Animism

Since time immemorial, the Galos have lived harmoniously with the nature. Their belief system is deeply rooted in balance, respect for all forms of existence (living or non-livings). Nature for the Galo people, is not merely a resource to be exploited but a sacred realm shared by humans, animals, plants, rivers, mountains or plains.

Central to the Galo belief system is the belief that every living and non-living created by one supreme creator known as *Yirne Mane* (*Yirne mane* is the supreme creator according to Galo beliefs). Each entity whether living or non-living, is created for a purpose. The animals, the trees and even rocks are created for a purpose.¹ Every entity is believed to have a guardian/protector who watches over them. According to Galo beliefs, every living being in the natural world, possess inherent right to live, just as the humans do. Any unnecessary harm done upon any living creature is condemned. It is considered as immoral. Those who unnecessarily harm other beings are believed to gain the wrath of the deities. No wrong doing goes unnoticed by the eyes of the supreme creator. The offender gets punished by the deities in form of illnesses and misfortunes.²

Killing among the Galo people is regarded as a sin. However, when its necessary hunting is practiced by the Galos. But they seek the permission of the guardian spirits before the hunt. The hunters offer their produce such as a handful of rice and few drops of rice beer etc. to appease the spirits and humbly chants a request to allow them an easy hunt to feed their family

¹ Excerpt from an interview with Angu, Tuken by the Author on 9th Sept. 2025

² Excerpt from an interview with Kamsi, Moken by the Author on 24th Jul. 2025

or the community.³ They even commute with their cattle before slaughtering them. They explain the reason they need to be slaughtered (to feed their people or as a sacrifice in a ritual) and beg their pardon for doing so.⁴

Hunting for pleasure is frowned upon in Galo society. Killing of any kind whether its intentional, unintentional, accidental or in self-defence, they must be followed by penance rituals. On failing to do so, the deities befall to the concerned or their family with grave misfortunes in form of illnesses or untimely deaths in the family etc. A person who kills a beast such as Tiger, needs to observe strict penance rituals to cleanse himself of the sin he has committed. He gets banned from celebrating Mopin, the most important festival of the Galos (Sharma 76). He does not get to enter his house before the penance period is over. Even after the mandatory rituals are over, he does not take *Iti* (a traditional rice bread made with rice powder) and ginger for the rest of his life (Doye 336). Furthermore, even after his death, he is denied the privilege of having his corpse smeared with *Iti* rice-powder paste- an auspicious ritual performed for the dead in Galo society as a sign of a glorious life lived (*Iti*, the rice powder paste is used in for smearing on one another's face as a sign of wishing the other with good fortune. Smearing of *Iti* is considered as a sign of celebration and good fortune in Galo society) .⁵

Forest for the Galo people is not a mere resource, but a realm of mystical beings. While entering the forest, the Galo people introduce themselves and also commute to the spirits about the purpose of their visit and humbly ask for their permission for their temporary stay. Before clearing a portion of forest or felling of big trees the priests chant prayers to appease the forest spirits. According to the Galo beliefs, the

act of taking from the forest, whether its edibles, woods etc. needs to be justified, otherwise it may invite the anger of the spirits and the concerned or their family may suffer from different kinds of diseases, or mishaps or in some cases spirit abduction known as *Yapom Jonam*.

Galos worldview is not limited to trees and animals, but it extends to the landscape itself. The mountains and the rivers are also revered. The water bodies are considered sacred, hence fishing too much, polluting a water body or throwing stones for no reasons is seen as an insult to the water bodies is condemned by the society and also by the spirits. Large rocks known as *Ili Litak Lirak* are revered by the Galos, as these big rocks Provide shelter to the hunters or any passers-by. They are believed to be shelters for the *Ypoms*.⁶ Due to the sacred roles of these rocks, they are treated with reverence. One is expected to behave responsibly in order to maintain balance and also to avoid inviting misfortunes caused by the angered spirits.

The belief of things having a spirit of its own is not only confined to the natural objects but also extend to man-made objects. Everyday items that is used in daily life, be it a furniture or utensils possess a life and a spirit of its own, according to the Galo beliefs and therefore deserve respect. According to this belief, objects which is treated well remains happy and last long and bless their owners for taking good care of them. The Galos believes that a house, even though very old, remains standing as long as people live in it. On the other hand, a house frequently left on its own or abandoned, falls into ruin much quicker even if it is not aged much.⁷ Actions such as slamming doors or

³ Excerpt from an interview with Bam, Jummar by the Author on 30th Nov. 2025

⁴ Excerpt from an interview with Lingo, Ipa by the Author on 1st Aug. 2025

⁵ Excerpt from an interview with Taso, Ipu by the Author on 2nd Oct. 2025

⁶ Excerpt from an interview with Taye, Darba by the author on 26th Sept. 2025

⁷ Excerpt from an interview with Kamsi, Moken by the author on 24th Jul. 2025

deliberately damaging furniture, mishandling utensils are strongly condemned. These actions are believed to bring misfortunes to the concerned.⁸ One of which is developing a swollen belly after the death, which is seen as a shameful fate in Galo society.

Conclusion

The Galos of Arunachal Pradesh lead a life deeply rooted in animistic worldview. They live in a world where everything is inseparable from natural, material and to spiritual. Their belief system is deeply rooted in respect, responsibility and balance which is supported by social norms which govern their everyday life. Every entity, be it humans, animals, landscape, natural or man-made objects all are considered as participants of a shared cosmic order created by one supreme creator.

The Galo understanding of life is based on indigenous ecological wisdom. A lifestyle based on harmony over individual desire. It puts a lot emphasis on restraint over exploitation. It promotes a life of sustainability and accountability.

In an era of modern sophistication, where alienation from nature and environmental degradation is widespread, the Galo worldview offers an alternative way of life which is more sustainable. Galos do not believe in exploitation of nature but in maintaining a balance between the human and the natural world.

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⁸ Excerpt from an interview with Jini, Mojum on 29th Dec. 2025