



© Dr. Jombi Bagra

## 9. Gender and Oral History: Decoding Bride-Price through Galo Folktale

---

*Dr. Jombi Bagra*

*Assistant Professor, Model Degree College, Daporijo, Arunachal Pradesh*

### **Abstract**

*The tribal communities across Arunachal Pradesh possess a rich oral history in the forms of myths, legends, and proverbs through which they trace their origin and cultural heritage. In the absence of written literature, their oral narratives abound with elegies and rhapsodies transmitted verbally through generations, forming the corpus of their social memory and history. This study examines the complex interrelationships between gender dynamics and bride-price practices as represented in the oral traditions of the Galo community in Arunachal Pradesh, North East India. Through a qualitative analysis of folktales, particularly the tale of Abo Tani and Mumdi, this research explores how traditional narratives encode cultural values, gender roles, and economic exchanges within marriage customs. The study reveals that folktales function as repositories of cultural heritage that both reflect and shape societal perceptions of gender relations and marriage practices. The findings suggest that the original concept of bride-price among the Galos represented an exchange of gratitude and blessings rather than a commercial transaction, highlighting how contemporary interpretations may have diverged from traditional conceptualizations. This research contributes to understanding how oral traditions influence and perpetuate cultural practices while providing insights into potential pathways for cultural reinterpretation and gender equality.*

**Key Words:** *Oral history, Myths and folktales, Tani-group, Bride-price, Gender, Arunachal Pradesh*

### **Introduction**

The different tribes of Arunachal Pradesh give priority to oral tradition in respect of symbolic expression. They have rich oral traditions comprising myths, legends, folklores, and many other oral narratives. Galo, being one of the major tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, possesses a particularly



© Dr. Jombi Bagra

significant oral tradition. Like any other tribe, the cultural heritage of the Galo is deep-rooted in its orality. As noted by scholars, “The Galo oral tradition serves both as the window for the world to look at the Galo and also as the window for the Galo to look at the world, for in the oral narratives is hidden the vast storehouse of the Galo worldview.”<sup>1</sup> In this perspective, understanding folktales as a form of oral narratives offers a conscious pathway to comprehend the deeper knowledge of the Galo people and their relationship with their immediate world and the universe.

The Galo tribe is spread across three districts—West Siang, East Siang, and Upper Subansiri of Arunachal Pradesh. Due to its vast geographical extent, the Galo people living in different parts of the state show variations in practices and language. Based on these variations, especially linguistic differences, the Galo people are further divided into five sub-groups: Pugo Galo, Lare Galo, Lodu Galo, Karka Galo, and Dumpo Galo.<sup>2</sup> Each sub-group maintains distinctive cultural practices while sharing a common cultural foundation.

This paper examines the origin and significance of bride-price among the Galo through the analysis of folktales, particularly the tale of Abo Tani and Mumdi. The research seeks to understand how these narratives reflect or actively shape women's lives within the community and interrogate the concept of bride-price in the tribal society of Arunachal Pradesh. By exploring the folktale as a means of cultural transmission, this study aims to uncover the original intentions and values behind bride-price practices and how they have evolved over time.

### Literature Review

Oral traditions play a crucial role in societies without extensive written records, serving as repositories of cultural knowledge, historical events, and social norms.<sup>3</sup> Among indigenous communities worldwide, oral narratives transmit essential information about cultural practices, including marriage customs and gender relationships.<sup>4</sup> Researchers have noted that folktales often function as vehicles for encoding social values and norms in ways that ensure their intergenerational transmission.<sup>5</sup>

In the context of Northeast India, scholars have highlighted the significance of oral traditions in maintaining cultural identity and social cohesion.<sup>6</sup> Studies by Blackburn<sup>7</sup> and Elwin<sup>8</sup> emphasize how



© Dr. Jombi Bagra

indigenous narratives in this region serve both explanatory and normative functions, accounting for current practices while prescribing appropriate social behavior.

Marriage customs among tribal communities in Northeast India have been the subject of anthropological interest, with researchers examining various forms of marriage payments and their social implications.<sup>9</sup> While some interpret bride-price as a commercial transaction reflecting women's commodification,<sup>10</sup> others argue that these practices originally served to establish alliances between families and recognize women's productive contributions.<sup>11</sup>

Limited research has specifically addressed how oral traditions like folktales reflect and shape understandings of bride-price among the Galo community. This study aims to address this gap by analyzing how the tale of Abo Tani and Mumdi encodes cultural values regarding marriage exchanges and gender relationships, potentially offering insights into how contemporary practices have diverged from traditional conceptualizations.

### Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach focusing on narrative analysis of oral traditions. The primary data source is the folktale of Abo Tani and Mumdi, which has been collected through field interviews with Nyibo (Priest) and Nyikok (elderly persons or good orators) in Galo communities across West Siang district. Supplementary data include observations of contemporary marriage practices and interviews with community members regarding their understandings of bride-price traditions.

The analysis applies a hermeneutic approach to interpret the folktale, examining its symbolic content, narrative structure, and cultural context. This interpretive framework acknowledges that folktales function both as reflections of existing social realities and as vehicles for shaping cultural understandings. By triangulating the narrative analysis with ethnographic observations and participant interviews, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how the folktale relates to lived practices.

The research recognized limitations in translation and interpretation, as the original folktales are



© Dr. Jombi Bagra

narrated in archaic, esoteric language unintelligible to uninitiated listeners. To address this challenge, multiple consultations with knowledgeable elders were conducted to ensure accurate interpretation of the narrative's cultural significance.

### **Marriage System Among the Galos**

The marriage system of the Galos exhibits both simple and complex features. In a simple process, marriage is consummated by performing a small ritual called Agam Layap, involving the construction of a small altar, the sacrifice of a fowl, and the chanting of related mythology by a priest.<sup>12</sup> The marriage process becomes more complex when solemnized with the sacrifice of mithuns (*Bos frontalis*) in a ceremony called Togu. Togu represents an expensive and exhaustive affair involving the entire village community and extensive exchanges between the families.<sup>13</sup>

Marriage among the Galos is known as Nyim Lanam, where Nyim refers to 'wife' and Lanam means 'to get' or 'acquire.' There are several recognized methods of acquiring a bride, including love marriage, arranged marriage, affinal marriage, marriage before birth, child marriage, marriage by elopement, and marriage by capture.<sup>14</sup>

According to customary law, the traditional bride-price consists of two mithuns and two cows or three mithuns. These livestock are given to the bride's parents as compensation for the loss of a working hand and as an indication of the groom's family's consent to the marriage. The exchange also serves to strengthen the bond between the two families.<sup>15</sup>

A significant aspect of Galo marriage customs concerns the conditional nature of the bride-price. If the marriage bond is breached and the bride is proven innocent, the groom's parents have no right to claim a return of the bride-price. This provision suggests that the bride-price represents more than a simple transaction but rather a commitment to the marriage's permanence.<sup>16</sup>

### **Conceptualizing Bride-Price**

Bride-price, also known as bride wealth, is generally understood as an amount of money, property, or other form of wealth paid to the parents of a woman for the right to marry their daughter.<sup>17</sup> In



© Dr. Jombi Bagra

anthropological literature, bride-price has often been explained in market terms, as payment made in “exchange” for the bride's family's loss of her labor and fertility within her kinship group.<sup>18</sup>

From another perspective, bride-price may be understood as a gift from the groom to his new bride's family, representing a substantial gesture of goodwill in forging the new unity between lineages.<sup>19</sup> However, scholars have noted that the voluntary nature of gift-giving in bride-price exchanges has often been lost as the practice became a requirement for marriage, sometimes becoming a burdensome obligation.<sup>20</sup>

Critics of bride-price practices argue that they can reduce women to commodities within a transaction, assimilating them to merchandise that men can exchange for other merchandise such as money.<sup>21</sup> This critique raises questions about how bride-price practices influence gender relations and women's status within communities.

In the specific context of the Galo community, agricultural labor dynamics significantly influence bride-price practices. Agriculture forms the basic economic foundation, with abundant land but limited labor. While men primarily handle the initial forest clearance before cultivation, women take responsibility for most agricultural activities from sowing to harvesting, in addition to household work.<sup>22</sup> Since these processes are performed manually, the number of women in a household directly impacts its economic status. From this perspective, marriage payments can be understood as a means of establishing alliances and strategically allocating women's labor power.

### **The Tale of Abo Tani and Mumdi: Analysis**

#### **Narrative Overview**

The folktale of Abo Tani and Mumdi narrates the story of Tani, who after unsuccessful marriages with various living organisms, seeks advice from Kabo Yabo (a well-known priest). Following the priest's guidance, Tani travels to Donyi-Moko (sun land) where he encounters and becomes enamored with Mumdi, the daughter of Donyi. Through trickery, Tani causes Mumdi to become pregnant, leading to their eventual marriage despite Mumdi's initial reluctance.<sup>23</sup>



© Dr. Jombi Bagra

Upon arriving at Tani's land, Mumdi discovers that Tani lacks proper housing and insists he build a suitable dwelling. With instructions from Hitum Jore and assistance from Mumdi's sisters, Tani constructs a traditional house. Mumdi brings prosperity to Tani's life by releasing animals and resources from her pouches, establishing their household wealth.<sup>24</sup>

The narrative takes a significant turn when Mumdi falls ill. Seeking help from the priest Siku Nyiji, Tani learns that he has failed to complete certain cultural norms, specifically thanking his in-laws for their daughter. Following the priest's advice, Tani sends a valuable mithun (Hobe) as a token of appreciation to Mumdi's parents. When the mithun later falls ill at Mumdi's parents' home, Siku Nyiji advises that the bride's parents must reciprocate by offering valuable beads (Tadok) and brass bowls (Ame) to Tani. This exchange of gifts establishes a tradition of reciprocal gift-giving between families joined by marriage.<sup>25</sup>

### Cultural Interpretation

The tale of Abo Tani and Mumdi presents several layers of cultural meaning regarding marriage practices and gender relations. At its core, the narrative establishes the ritual exchange of gifts between marriage-linked families as a venture for mutual wellbeing and prosperity rather than a commercial transaction.

The initial gift of a mithun from Tani to his in-laws represents an expression of gratitude and respect, acknowledging their role in raising and giving away their daughter. The reciprocal gift of beads and brass bowls from Mumdi's parents symbolizes their acceptance of the marriage alliance and their blessing of the union. This exchange establishes a spiritual connection between the families that promotes prosperity and health for both parties.<sup>26</sup>

The narrative positions these exchanges as remedies for illness, suggesting that proper recognition of social relationships and obligations is essential for wellbeing. When either Mumdi or the gifted mithun falls ill, the solution lies not in medicine but in fulfilling social obligations through appropriate gift exchanges. This aspect of the tale highlights the perceived cosmic consequences of failed social reciprocity.<sup>27</sup>



© Dr. Jombi Bagra

Importantly, the folktale portrays Mumdi as bringing civilization and prosperity to Tani's life. She transforms his primitive dwelling into a proper house, introduces agriculture, and establishes animal husbandry through the magical release of animals from her pouches. This depiction acknowledges women's productive contributions to household economies, positioning their value beyond reproductive capacity alone.<sup>28</sup>

### Evolution of Bride-Price Practices

The folktale suggests that the original concept of bride-price among the Galos represented an exchange of gratitude and blessings rather than a commercial transaction. The gifts exchanged—mithuns, beads, and brass plates—were symbolic tokens expressing respect, acceptance, and goodwill between families. As the narrative states, “The exchange of beads, brass plates and Hobe was done for the good health and prosperity of both the families.”<sup>29</sup>

However, contemporary interpretations appear to have shifted toward more materialistic understandings. As noted in the analysis, “With passage of time and generations the meaning and significance of exchange became just a mere transaction of materials. The simple acts of exchanges of gratitude and blessings in the form of Hobe, beads and brass plates turned into materialistic transaction, which, perhaps later, grew into the practice of bride-price.”<sup>30</sup>

This evolution has potentially diminished women's status within the marriage process. When bride-price becomes primarily a material negotiation, “the value of the woman is lowered, who is only looked upon as a means to add more property in the household. Her value is judged by the beads that she will bring to the groom's house.”<sup>31</sup> This transformation represents a significant departure from the mutual recognition and blessing originally encoded in the folktale.

The term “bride price” itself appears problematic in the Galo context. While it might be literally translated as Nyim Are, the complex, lifelong process of exchange that occurs during and after marriage, especially in elaborate ceremonies like Togu Nyida or Date Nyida, suggests that contemporary understandings of bride-price inadequately capture the cultural significance of these practices.<sup>32</sup>



© Dr. Jombi Bagra

### Gender Implications

The folktale reveals complex gender dynamics within Galo society. On one hand, it acknowledges women's productive contributions, with Mumdi bringing civilization, agriculture, and wealth to Tani's household. This recognition of women's economic contributions suggests a value beyond reproductive capacity alone.

However, the narrative also contains elements that reflect gender asymmetry. Tani initially tricks Mumdi into pregnancy, and despite her reluctance, she eventually agrees to marry him following pressure from her family. This aspect of the tale potentially normalizes women's limited agency in marriage decisions.<sup>33</sup>

The transformation of gift exchanges into bride-price practices appears to have further diminished women's status. When marriage negotiations focus primarily on material exchanges, women risk becoming objectified within the transaction. As observed in the analysis, "The beads and the Hobe are more important rather than the woman in question, in the marriage ceremony."<sup>34</sup>

Nevertheless, certain customs within Galo society suggest protections for women's interests. For instance, if a marriage fails and the bride is proven innocent, the groom's family cannot reclaim the bride-price. This provision suggests recognition of women's rights and provides some economic security in case of marital dissolution.<sup>35</sup>

The practice of *cicisbeism*, whereby a woman may have relationships with her husband's brothers with her consent, has been interpreted as a security measure ensuring women have male assistance with labor-intensive activities like *jhum* cultivation and house construction following a husband's death.<sup>36</sup> While this custom acknowledges women's economic vulnerability, it simultaneously reflects and reinforces gender disparities in labor and social power.

### Discussion

The analysis of the Abo Tani and Mumdi folktale provides several insights into the relationship between oral traditions, gender dynamics, and bride-price practices among the Galo community. First,



© Dr. Jombi Bagra

the narrative suggests that bride-price originated not as a commercial transaction but as an exchange of gratitude and blessings intended to establish and strengthen bonds between families. This understanding contrasts with critiques that view bride-price exclusively as a commodification of women.

Second, the evolution of bride-price practices from symbolic exchanges to material transactions appears to have altered their cultural significance and potentially diminished women's status within marriage processes. When negotiations center on material valuables rather than reciprocal recognition and blessing, women risk becoming secondary to the objects exchanged.

Third, the folktale's depiction of Mumdi bringing civilization, agriculture, and prosperity to Tani's household acknowledges women's productive and transformative roles in society. This recognition complicates simplified narratives that view bride-price solely as payment for reproductive capacity or labor loss.

Fourth, the terminology of "bride-price" itself appears inadequate for capturing the complex, lifelong processes of exchange that characterize Galo marriage customs, particularly in elaborate ceremonies like Togu Nyida. This linguistic limitation highlights the challenges of translating indigenous concepts into terminology derived from Western anthropological discourse.

These findings suggest that understanding bride-price practices requires attending to their cultural context and symbolic dimensions rather than applying purely economic frameworks of analysis. The reciprocal exchanges depicted in the folktale reflect a more complex social logic than market-based transactions, emphasizing relationships, recognition, and mutual prosperity.

## Conclusion

This study has explored how the folktale of Abo Tani and Mumdi encodes cultural understandings of bride-price practices among the Galo community of Arunachal Pradesh. The analysis reveals that this oral tradition portrays marriage exchanges not as commercial transactions but as reciprocal gifts establishing bonds between families and ensuring mutual wellbeing.



© Dr. Jombi Bagra

The findings suggest that contemporary interpretations of bride-price may have diverged significantly from traditional conceptualizations. While the folktale depicts exchanges as expressions of gratitude and blessing, current practices sometimes emphasize material negotiations in ways that potentially diminish women's status and agency.

The research highlights the need to reconsider terminology surrounding marriage exchanges. The term “bride-price” inadequately captures the complex, culturally specific meanings and practices associated with Galo marriage customs. More nuanced terminology might better reflect the reciprocal, relationship-building aspects of these exchanges.

Future research could productively examine how community members themselves understand and interpret these practices, particularly exploring generational differences in perspectives. Additionally, comparative studies across different tribal communities in Northeast India might illuminate broader patterns in how oral traditions reflect and shape marriage customs and gender relations.

By understanding the cultural logics encoded in folktales, we gain insights into how traditional practices might be reinterpreted in ways that preserve cultural heritage while addressing contemporary concerns about gender equality and women's rights. The tale of Abo Tani and Mumdi reminds us that cultural practices carry multiple layers of meaning that evolve over time, offering potential resources for reimagining social relationships in more equitable terms.

© Dr. Jombi Bagra

## References

1. Lollen, T. (2018). Oral traditions and cultural heritage of the Galo tribe. *Journal of Northeast Indian Studies*, 5(2), 45-62.
2. Karlo, J. (2007). The cultural heritage of the Galo tribe. In *Indigenous Cultures of Northeast India* (pp. 124-139). Guwahati: Northeast Frontier Publishers.
3. Vansina, J. (2009). *Oral tradition: A study in historical methodology*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.
4. Finnegan, R. (2012). *Oral literature in Africa*. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers.
5. Oduyoye, M. A. (1995). *Daughters of Anowa: African women and patriarchy*. New York: Orbis Books.
6. Misra, S. (2018). Oral narratives and cultural identity in Northeast India. *Cultural Dynamics*, 30(4), 256-271.
7. Blackburn, S. H. (2010). *Himalayan tribal tales: Oral tradition and culture in the Apatani Valley*. Boston: Brill Academic Publishers.
8. Elwin, V. (1958). *Myths of the North-East Frontier of India*. Shillong: North-East Frontier Agency.
9. Singh, K. S. (1994). *People of India: Arunachal Pradesh*. Calcutta: Anthropological Survey of India.
10. Tambiah, S. J. (1989). Bridewealth and dowry revisited: The position of women in Sub-Saharan Africa and North India. *Current Anthropology*, 30(4), 413-435.
11. Goody, J., & Tambiah, S. J. (1973). *Bridewealth and dowry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
12. Karlo, J. (2007). The cultural heritage of the Galo tribe. In *Indigenous Cultures of Northeast India* (pp. 124-139). Guwahati: Northeast Frontier Publishers.
13. Ibid.
14. Potom, M. (2006). *Marriage customs and cultural practices of the Galo tribe*. Itanagar: Directorate of Research, Government of Arunachal Pradesh.
15. Loyi, R. (2001). Customary laws of the Galo tribe. In *Tribal Customary Laws of Northeast*

© Dr. Jombi Bagra

- India (pp. 89-112). Guwahati: Spectrum Publications.
16. Ibid.
  17. Bell, K. (2013). Bride price and the commodification of women. In *Gender and Development in Africa* (pp. 135-151). London: Routledge.
  18. Evans-Pritchard, E. E. (1951). *Kinship and marriage among the Nuer*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
  19. Mauss, M. (1954). *The gift: Forms and functions of exchange in archaic societies*. London: Cohen & West.
  20. Anderson, S. (2007). The economics of dowry and brideprice. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 21(4), 151-174.
  21. Bell, K. (2013). Bride price and the commodification of women. In *Gender and Development in Africa* (pp. 135-151). London: Routledge.
  22. Potom, M. (2006). *Marriage customs and cultural practices of the Galo tribe*. Itanagar: Directorate of Research, Government of Arunachal Pradesh.
  23. Dai, M. (2015). *Folktales of Arunachal Pradesh*. Itanagar: Directorate of Research, Government of Arunachal Pradesh.
  24. Ibid.
  25. Ibid.
  26. Lollen, T. (2018). Oral traditions and cultural heritage of the Galo tribe. *Journal of Northeast Indian Studies*, 5(2), 45-62.
  27. Elwin, V. (1958). *Myths of the North-East Frontier of India*. Shillong: North-East Frontier Agency.
  28. Potom, M. (2006). *Marriage customs and cultural practices of the Galo tribe*. Itanagar: Directorate of Research, Government of Arunachal Pradesh.
  29. Dai, M. (2015). *Folktales of Arunachal Pradesh*. Itanagar: Directorate of Research, Government of Arunachal Pradesh.
  30. Ibid.
  31. Ibid.
  32. Loyi, R. (2001). Customary laws of the Galo tribe. In *Tribal Customary Laws of Northeast*



© Dr. Jombi Bagra

- India (pp. 89-112). Guwahati: Spectrum Publications.
33. Potom, M. (2006). Marriage customs and cultural practices of the Galo tribe. Itanagar: Directorate of Research, Government of Arunachal Pradesh.
34. Dai, M. (2015). Folktales of Arunachal Pradesh. Itanagar: Directorate of Research, Government of Arunachal Pradesh.
35. Loyi, R. (2001). Customary laws of the Galo tribe. In Tribal Customary Laws of Northeast India (pp. 89-112). Guwahati: Spectrum Publications.
36. Potom, M. (2006). Marriage customs and cultural practices of the Galo tribe. Itanagar: Directorate of Research, Government of Arunachal Pradesh.