

Topic: Oral Tradition and the Genealogy of the Galo tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, India

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Abstract: Arunachal Pradesh, the north-easternmost part of India is a region which is still an unexplored territory in India. Because of its remoteness and difficult terrain, it is more or less cut-off from mainland India even today. Not many researchers have ventured into this land of dense and thick forest because of its inhospitable nature. Thus, very little is known about the different tribes that reside in this part of the country. The ethnic communities inhabiting the region have diverse and rich traditional knowledge systems but in the absence of any script these indigenous knowledge are passed on to the next generation orally. Galo is one such tribe inhabiting the region and due to the perishable nature of their material culture and the lack of written documents have become an important form of research which contains information regarding the history of the people. The oral tradition of the Galos contain narratives of the creation of the universe, human, migration, origin of agriculture, rituals, folklores etc. But unfortunately, due to the lack of awareness among the ethnic population especially among the younger generation after the introduction of modern education, this valuable intangible cultural heritage is on the verge of extinction. Therefore, through this paper an attempt will be made to understand some aspects of the oral tradition and document some of the genealogies of certain clans of Galo tribe.

Key Words: Arunachal Pradesh, Galo, Oral tradition, Genealogy

Introduction:

The North-East Hill region of India is comprised of seven states commonly known as the “Seven Sisters”. They are Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura.

Arunachal Pradesh is the north-easternmost state of India bordering Bhutan in the west, Tibet in the north-west, Myanmar in the east and China in the north. It is located between 26°28' - 29°30'N Latitude and 91°30' - 97°30' E Longitude.

The topography of Arunachal Pradesh is characterized by an undulating hilly terrain, rolling mountains, enchanting valleys and swift flowing streams. For a very long time the region remained remote from mainstream India due to its location in difficult terrain with impenetrable vegetation.

The state of Arunachal Pradesh is inhabited by several ethnic communities. There are as many as 26 major tribes and several hundred sub-tribes living in the mountainous and rugged terrain. The major tribes inhabiting the region are *Apatani, Aka, Bugun, Galo, Khampti, Memba, Miji, Minyong, Mishmi, Monpa, Nocte, Nyishi, Sherdukpen, Singhpo, Tangsa, Tagin, Wancho*, etc. The tribes have their own distinct cultural identities which makes them unique in their own way (**Fig. 1.1**). According to 2012 Census, Arunachal Pradesh comprises of 17 districts.

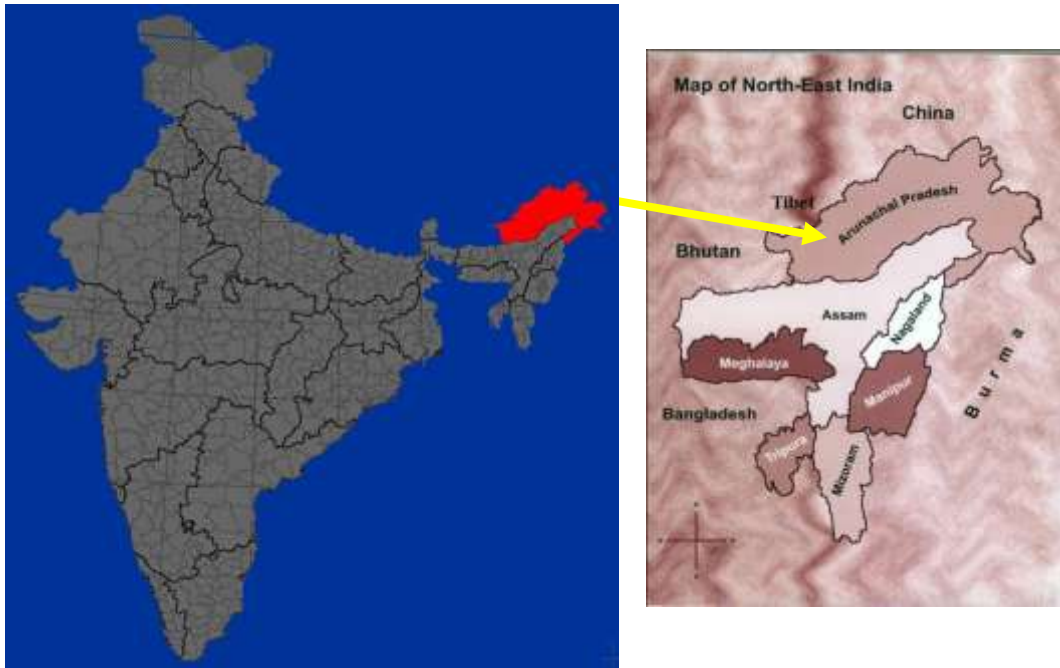


Fig. 1.1: Map showing the seven North-Eastern States of India

Galo is one of the prominent tribes in the region. According to 2011 Census, the Galo population is estimated at 1, 12,272. They are mostly found in the West Siang district however some of them are also settled in East and Upper Siang districts which is the central part of Arunachal Pradesh (**Fig.1.2**).

The Galos belong to the Tani group. The Tani group consists of Adi, Apatani, Hill Miri, Nishi and Tagin tribes. They believe in a common mythical

ancestor, *Abo Tani* and practice Donyi-Poloism. The Galos speak Galo dialect which is a branch of Tibeto-Burman language.

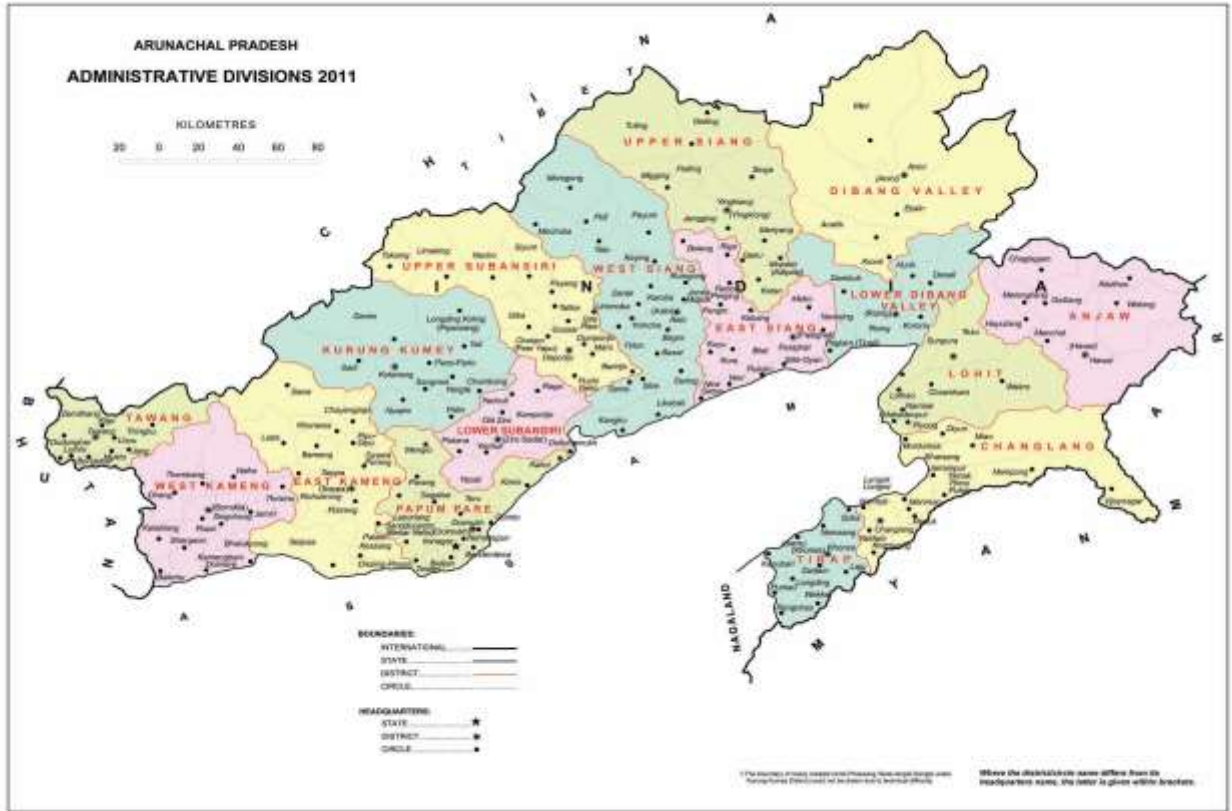


Fig. 1.2: District Map of Arunachal Pradesh

Traditionally, the Galos practice shifting cultivation and animal husbandry. Apart from agriculture and breeding animals, they have a broad diversity of food-gathering techniques.

The whole of Arunachal Pradesh is tremendously rich in folk heritage. The Galos have an extremely rich intangible cultural heritage. Their oral tradition is of outstanding cultural value. Post (2012) remarks that eastern Himalayan oral literature has real potential scientific value- these are not simply “stories” they are highly- structured products of human cultural ingenuity.

Due to its difficult terrain and inaccessibility, very little research work has been done on the people of the region and other aspects of their cultural life especially on their oral traditions. The oral tradition of the indigenous people is under threat of extinction.

The Galos have no indigenous writing of their own. So, their history is mostly known from other sources like the Tibetan texts, Ahom *Buranjis* (historical chronicles of the Ahoms) and the British historical records. Their history is written by distant outsiders; there is no written historical document which tells their histories in their own voice. Furthermore, the Galo material culture is mainly perishable in nature as it is entirely based on wood and bamboo; therefore, in the absence of written script and lack of archaeological findings, oral tradition becomes an important form of research which provides information regarding the history of the indigenous people of the land.

Galo oral histories display a variety of genres and subject matter, including folktales, migration stories, cosmologies, songs and several types of ritual text (Post, 2012:115). These narratives have been passed down since generations. The elder members of the community and the shaman or the priests are the repository of oral traditions. It provides a sense of identity and continuity to the community. The entire Galo culture is based on oral tradition.

Some of the oral narrations are narrated only on certain occasions for example migration legend of different clans known as “*Dello Mennam*” is narrated only during marriage ceremony. Usually migration narration are lengthy recitation therefore, apart from the priest, village elders who are well versed in folklores and myths also join and narrate the migration legend. Such narration starts from the creation of the world, plants, animals, human beings, tribes, clans, their original homeland, routes of migration taken by their ancestors up to their present location. Therefore, such narrations can be highly helpful in locating the sites of their sojourn and also to locate their original homeland. But in such narrations, the old name of places are mentioned which is not presently used by the people thus making it difficult to locate or identify. Some oral traditions also have legends which tell about the inter-tribal relationship. There are variations in such legends too as these are being orally transmitted through ages. In this way, the force of oral tradition can continue through generations although small details in the telling may

change. Therefore, a thorough and systematic study of their migration legend can help to trace the origin of many clans and tribes of this region.

Likewise, Galo rituals are usually accompanied by incantations. These are chanted by the priests and the co-priests from their memory while performing the rituals (**fig 1.3**). Similarly, Galo traditional songs are sung during different occasions like feasts, festivals, merry-making and to mark the different stages of life from birth to death. Each occasion has a specific theme based song sung either by the male or female depending on the nature of the occasion. The mourning songs or lamentation in funeral and post funeral ceremonies are an important part of the Galo oral tradition. Through singing, the mourner guides the soul of the deceased person to reach its destination.

During the performance of *`Poonuu*, which is the traditional dance of the Galos, the *`Poonuu* priest/leader narrates the folklore which are balladic in nature. The dance is conducted by a leader and there can be as many as participants (**Fig.1.4**).The *`Poonuu* leader is a person who is well-versed in the folklores. The *`Poonuu* leader narrates the stories and the myths in singing while the participant dancers repeat the refrain after each line of the song. The *`Poonuu* leader holds a sword (*ˆroksi*) upside down in his/her hand and along with the singing, shakes the sword and rattles the iron discs loosely fitted to its hilt for the music. The whole

narration is lengthy and can continue for an hour or even more, purely based on the memory of the *Poonuu* leader.



Fig.1.3.The priest reciting during a ritual



Fig. 1.4. *Mopin* priest leading the *Ponu*

Oral tradition is an integral part of Galo culture. For everything they do or believe is rooted in their oral tradition. Ranging from their folklore to ritual incantation is stored in the collected memory of the people of the community.

Another significant feature of Galo culture is their system of genealogy. The Galos have the practice of using the last syllable of the father's name as the first syllable of his children's name along with the name of the clan. Therefore, simply looking at a person's name, his/her place of origin can be identified. This is clearly illustrated in Fig.1.5 and 1.6.

Galos are the only tribe in Arunachal Pradesh who use this unique system of naming.

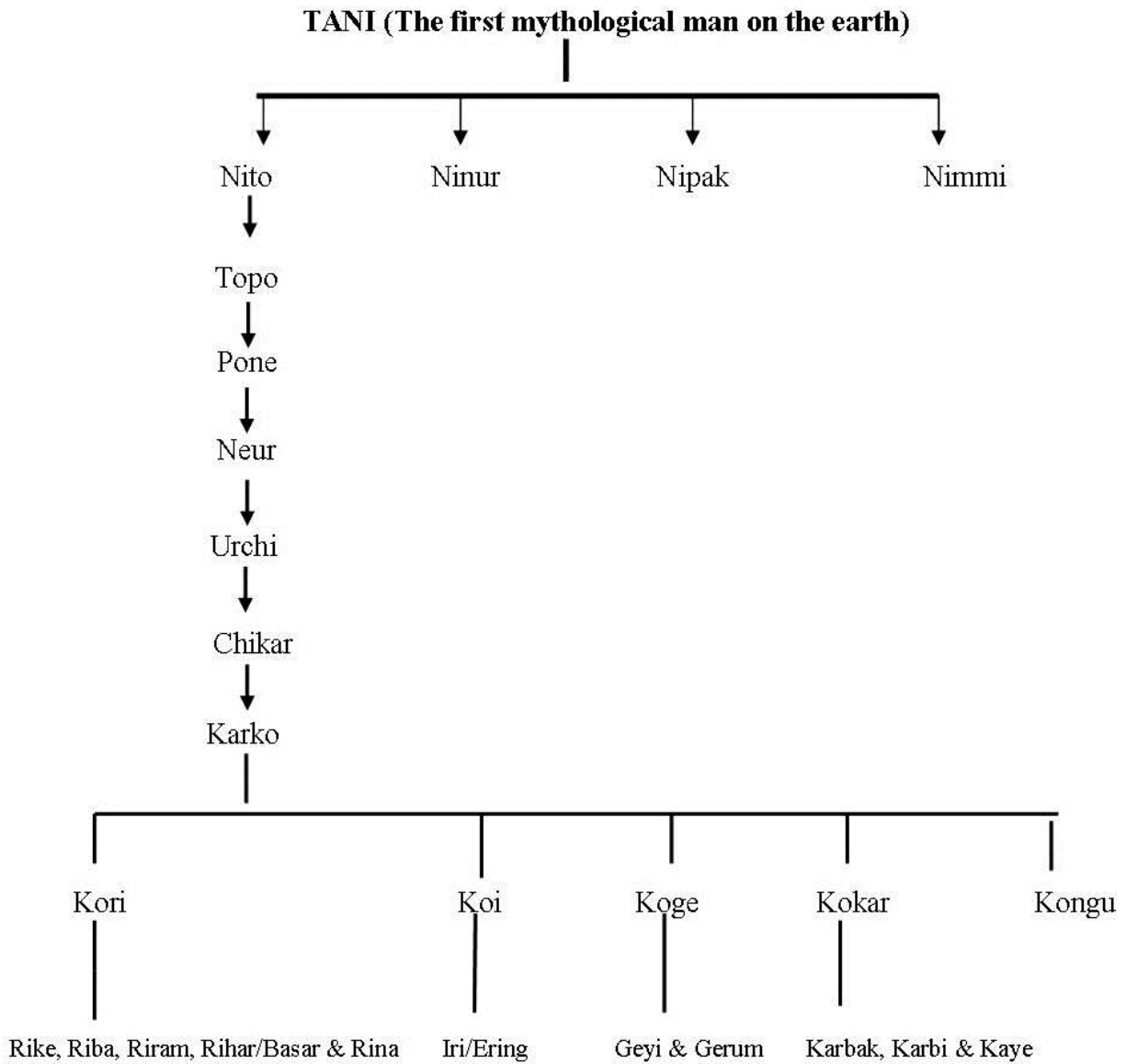


Fig.1.5: Shows genealogy of Riba clan

Genealogy of Jirido, Karlo, Lobi etc.

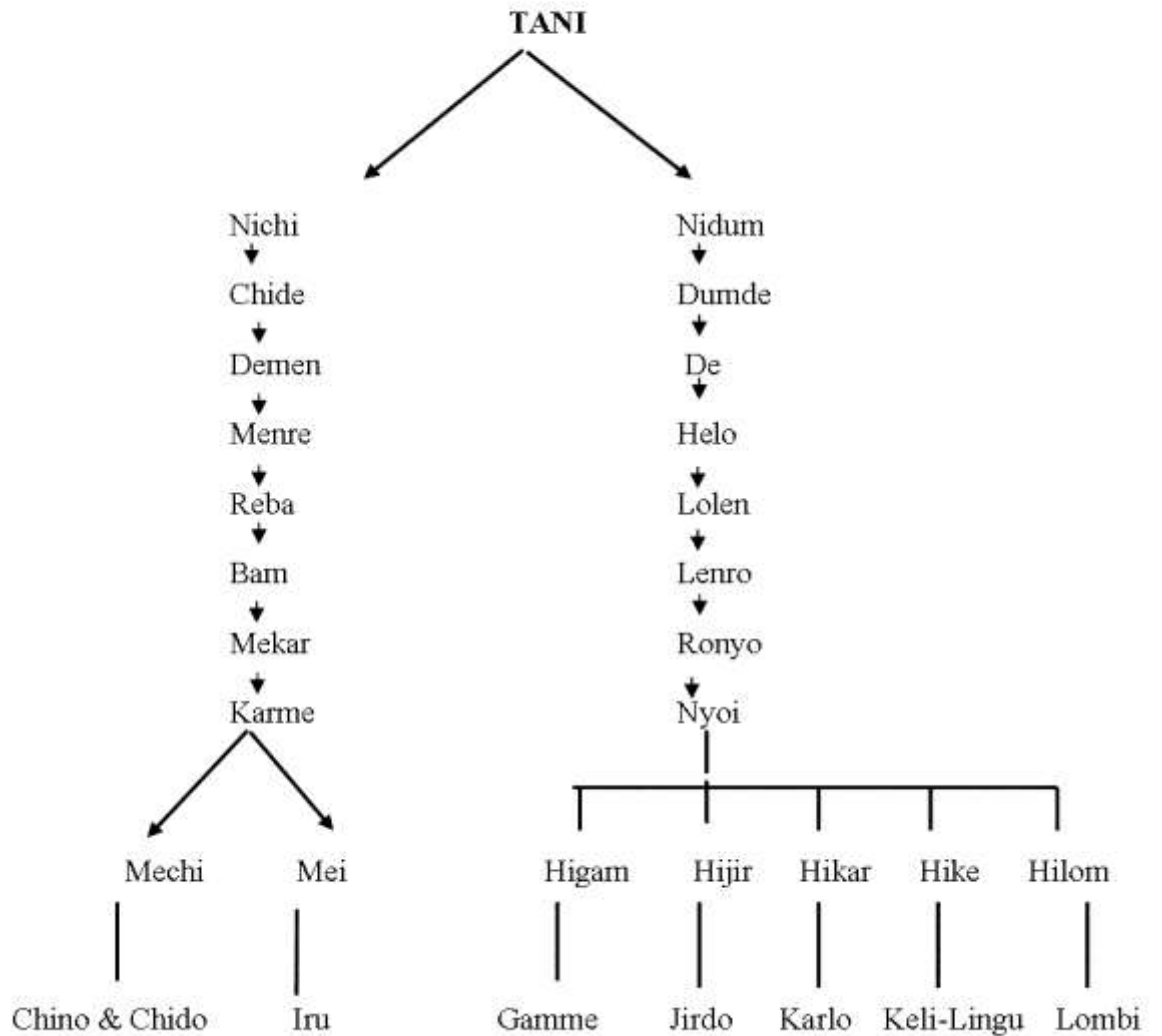


Fig. 1.6: Shows genealogy of Jirido, Karlo, Lombi clans

For marriage, the Galos strictly observe the rule of tribe endogamy and clan exogamy. This has been illustrated in Fig 1.7.

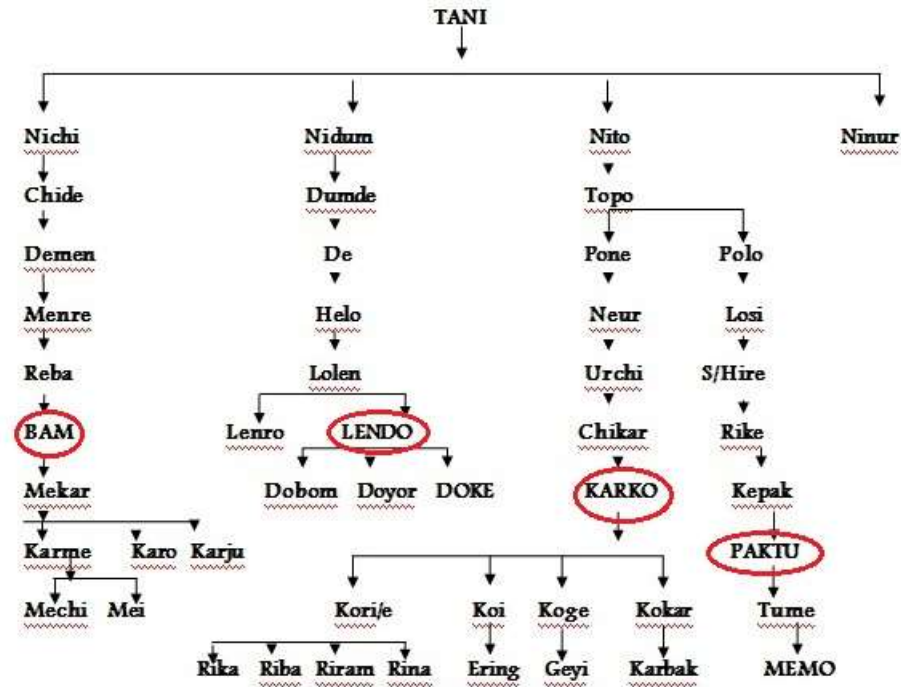


Fig 1.7 Chart showing the lineage of different clans

The significance of genealogy in a Galo society is utmost. This system of genealogy not only helps them to trace their lineages but also demonstrates kinship of its members within the clan. Based on genealogy marriage alliances are made within the clan. After every ritual, certain taboos are strictly observed by the Galos. For major rituals, not only the concerned family but the extended close families or the kith and kin based on the genealogy are also bound to observe the taboos.

Although oral history has been employed as an important method of social research, its usefulness as an alternate source of history has always been debated.

But this article argues that in a region like north-east India, in the absence of archaeological evidence due to its perishable material culture and dearth of written documents, the oral histories of the people are a valid form of method of research. The sources that are available are mostly outside sources which never looked into the history of the indigenous people; there is no historical document from their own perspective based on indigenous narratives and in these outside sources, the indigenous people or the people of the hills were addressed with derogatory terms and invariably portrayed as “savage” “unruly” and “primitive”.

For the Galos, the importance of oral history is more than mere memory of the past; it preserves and carries forward their ethics, religious beliefs and values to the young generation. This tradition has kept alive their Galo identity.

A thorough study and analysis of the oral history of the Galos can go a long way in corroborating the facts about the migratory routes of the indigenous communities’ inhabiting the region.

The ethnographic observation of the Galo society, judicio-administrative body, festival, dance help us to understand their rich intangible cultural heritage which may not leave any material remains because of its perishable nature but the oral traditions and indigenous traditional knowledge related to these materials have been passed on from generations to generations.

The exodus of young people from the countryside has reduced interest in taking part in the traditional performance. Because of this lack of awareness among the youth regarding oral tradition, their ancestral knowledge has just remained with the older generations and with the passing away of the older generations, the threat to the existence of this rich intangible cultural heritage has become acute.

Therefore, through this paper an attempt has been made to explore the significance of oral tradition among the Galos and to document the lineage of certain clans of the Galo tribe. This paper also stresses the need for the preservation, protection and promotion of the oral tradition of the Galos of Arunachal Pradesh.

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