

Myth, Memory, and Cultivation: The Story of Jhum among the Galo Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract

The paper explores the cultural relevance and mythological aspects of jhum cultivation among the Galo tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. The Galos have been practising jhum cultivation since time immemorial. Abotani, considered the first human being on earth, is said to have started the jhum cultivation with the divine aid of Mopin-Moji, the god of riches and harvest. The myth related to jhum cultivation shows the close relationship between the Galo people, their beliefs and their natural environment. This article highlights the complex mythologies explaining the origin and continuation of jhum cultivation, emphasizing the importance of this practice for the Galo community, their beliefs and traditions.

Keywords: Jhum cultivation, Abotani, Mopin, Cultural heritage, Traditional agriculture, Environmental sustainability, Oral traditions.

Introduction

Jhum cultivation, also known as shifting cultivation, is an aged-old agricultural practice that is established among the Galos of Arunachal Pradesh. For a very long time, they have relied on this cultivation for their sustenance. There are many steps involved in jhum cultivation viz. clearing of jungle, setting fire, weeding, harvesting etc. After some years, the farmer leaves the cultivated area as fallow for regeneration of the fertility of the soil. This cycle is repeated, making this practice sustainable and consistent with the respect the Galo tribe shows towards their environment.

The Galo are one of the major Tani tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, primarily inhabiting the central and western regions of the state, particularly in West Siang, Leparada, Lower Siang, and parts of Shi Yomi and East Siang districts. Traditionally, the Galos practice jhum cultivation as their main economic activity, supplemented by hunting, fishing, and animal husbandry. Their subsistence patterns are closely linked to ecological rhythms and ritual observances, including agricultural ceremonies to appease spirits like Yapom-Yaji. Politically, the Galo community organizes itself around the Keba, a traditional council of elders that settles disputes and upholds customary law. Religiously, they are Donyi-Polo worshippers, venerating the sun and moon as divine entities alongside a pantheon of nature spirits, with the Nyibo (priest) playing a vital role in conducting rituals and mediating between the human and

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spiritual realms. Major festivals such as Mopin and Mari are agricultural in nature and reflect the Galo worldview that links prosperity, moral conduct, and ecological harmony.

The myth of the origin of jhum cultivation has profound cultural significance for the Galo people. According to the myth, Abotani, who is considered the progenitor of Tani tribes, was the first person who started jhum cultivation. The beginning of jhum cultivation by Abotani is not just a story, rather it represents the worldview of the Galo people, who believe that there is a link between the natural and the supernatural worlds. The myth of jhum cultivation throws light on the relationship of the Galo people with their gods, their land, their traditions which they have continued for many generations.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To explore the mythological origins of jhum cultivation among the Galo tribe.
2. To examine the cultural and religious significance of jhum cultivation among the Galos.
3. To understand how the oral traditions and mythic narratives influence the ecological ethics and sustainable land use patterns of the Galo people.
4. To assess the role of jhum cultivation in fostering community cooperation, social bonding, and continuity of indigenous knowledge.

Research Methodology

The present study utilizes a qualitative research approach, drawing from both primary and secondary sources to investigate the cultural relevance and mythological roots of Jhum cultivation within the Galo tribe. Oral histories, myths, and folklore gathered from Galo community members are examples of primary sources. Academic books, research papers, and articles are examples of secondary materials that shed light on the cultural and historical background of jhum cultivation. A thematic analysis of the gathered narratives is used in the research, with an emphasis on important issues including the function of ancestor characters, the interaction between humans and the environment, and the cultural values connected to agriculture.

Study area

The Galos, one of the major tribes of Arunachal Pradesh are settled largely in the central part of the state. The present study is concentrated in the core settlement zones of the Galo tribe across central and western Arunachal Pradesh, specifically encompassing the districts of Lower Siang, West Siang, and Leparada, along with parts of Shi Yomi and East Siang. The terrain is largely mountainous and receives heavy monsoonal rainfall, which has historically shaped the Galo way of life, especially their dependence on shifting cultivation for subsistence. Geographically, the region is situated between approximately 27°30'N to 29°00'N latitude and 93°00'E to 95°00'E longitude. It is marked by steep hilly terrain, forested landscapes, and the presence of important river systems such as the Siang (Tsangpo/Brahmaputra) and its tributaries including the Siyom, Hiri, and Sipu rivers. These rivers have not only shaped the local topography but have historically served as vital

corridors of migration, communication, and cultivation. Climatically, the study area falls under the Eastern Himalayan monsoonal regime, receiving heavy rainfall averaging 2500–3500 mm annually, with significant implications for both agriculture and settlement patterns. Villages are commonly located along hill slopes or ridges, often at altitudes ranging from 300 to 1500 meters above sea level, where forested plots are cleared for seasonal jhum cultivation.

Mythological Origins of Jhum Cultivation

The Role of Abotani

Abotani is considered as the first human being by all the Tani tribes, including the Galos. According to the myth, in the beginning Abotani lived like a nomad with no permanent residing place. Since he did not know about agriculture, he was dependent on the produce of the nature for sustenance which was not an easy life. Survival was difficult and future uncertain, a chaotic and disorderly time.

The guardian angel and creator of the world, Ane Dinyi-Loma felt pity for Abotani and decided to help him. She is portrayed as a kind goddess and a stabilizing and prosperous force for the humanity. She knew that to live a happy and prosperous life, Abotani must settle down and start agricultural practices. She instructed Abotani to fix a takom (fishing trap) in a river to catch fish. Abotani followed her instructions and every morning he would go and check the takom. One day, Abotani saw that his takom was filled with ekkam (leaves), bamboo and wood residues. Lidu-Tode (a water bird) told him that Takar-Taji (the Chief of living being) was performing Togu-Padak (marriage ceremony) on the upper course of the river. He further informed Abotani that for this ceremony he has prepared ten mithuns (*Bos frontalis*) for sacrifice along with huge quantity of opo (rice beer) and asin (food). Hence, all these debris are due to those preparations for the wedding ceremony. After hearing this, Abotani got angry and decided to punish Takar-Taji by snatching the ten mithuns. On Abotani's request, Lidu-Tode dropped his faeces on stones all the way to marriage ceremony.

Before going to Takar-Taji's place, Abotani sought assistance from Ane Dinyi-Loma who instructed him to make an effigy of kolu (wild banana plant), properly dress it in a women's attire and place it near the edge of the highest peak. She further instructed Abotani to keep a murte kome (a bamboo stick) nearby the effigy. After carrying out Ane Dinyi-Loma's instruction Abotani with his dog Kipu, followed the faeces dropped by the bird and reached Takar-Taji's place. As was told to him, there were ten mithuns kept tied for sacrifice and all the ritual images were already installed. Moreover, Abotani saw that all the living beings were invited, except him. Making him feel highly insulted and more determined to take revenge. Abotani asked Takar-Taji to show his various instruments for wedding such as Papum-Pachak, (a small bag shaped metal being carried on back by the bride and groom during the ceremony), Papum-Pasak, Gui Pasak, Gui-Gamyo, Murdom-Ponyo, Isi-Pukshi. After observing them, he pointed out that Takar-Taji's rindu-kindu (itineraries of making image) preparation is wrong and gave him grave warning that it will lead to catastrophe if not corrected immediately. Hearing this Takar-Taji became very upset and requested Abotani to show them the correct design. Abotani replied that only his mother knows the proper way of

crafting that particular image who lives at the edge of the highest peak, but she is deaf and dumb and so a kome (bamboo stick) is always kept nearby her to get her response. In reality, Abotani did not have a mother, it was a cunning trick played by him which succeeded.

Takar-Taji sent his servant Kako-Tazhi, (Paako tau, kekopai in some version) a kind of tree shrew similar to squirrel in look with pointed mouth, to approach Abotani's mother with the instruction that since the woman is deaf and dumb, he should use the Kome (bamboo stick) to get her response. Kako-Tazhi reached the place where Abotani's mother effigy was kept. As per the instruction, when he pushed Abotani's mother's effigy with the stick kept nearby to get her response, to his utter shock the effigy fell from the high peak and drowned into the deep river. The poor squirrel returned terror-stricken and narrated the whole incident to Abotani and Takar Taji. Abotani became very happy because his plan had worked but he acted as if he is grief-stricken and threatened to destroy the whole world in anger. Takar Taji apologized and requested Abotani to calm down and said that he is ready to compensate for his mother's death. Abotani demanded the ten mithun as compensation. Takar-Taji reluctantly agreed to give the ten Hobe (Mithuns). Abotani spared one mithun on the persistent request of Takar Taji as he had invited a large number of guests and so one Mithun was not sufficient for the whole guests that had arrived. In compensation, the guests were offered various costly objects by Takar Taji.

Dumpu (the deer) and Kipu (the dog) were given a pack of fermented agyaa posum (a packet of soya bean) and lote posum (a packet of bone) which were to be divided between them. But both quarrelled over division. Dumpu accidentally kicked the dog's packet of bone in anger. Afraid of the dog's reprisal, the deer ran away. While running away it again stamped on the packet of agyaa-posum (soyabean). The dog also became furious and ran after the deer. It was not difficult for the dog to follow the deer, as the deer had stamped on the fermented soya bean (Due to this it is believed that the foot of deer still gives the smell of fermented soya bean which enables the dog to trace out the deer in the jungle easily). By following the track made by the deer, the dog reached the Diigoo-Piirne, the heavenly land of Mopin. Mopin is considered as the goddess of agriculture, the preserver of plant kingdom by the Galos. She can be compared with Annapurna Devi. Abotani too also followed his dog and thereby reached Diigoo-Piirne. Dumpu requested for shelter from the goddess Mopin.

Mopin was surprised to see them. However, to protect the deer, Mopin imprisoned both Abotani and his dog and fettered their feet with Pako-Raglik (wood). Dinyi-Loma, after learning about these things reached Abotani with her magical power and devised a plan to escape from that place. Accordingly, Abotani told the dog to look for a rodent. The dog, with the help of another dog caught a smelly Kirti-Pumpa (a kind of rodent that looks like a mole whose anal glands gives bad musky odour to repel enemies, especially the male one). Abotani hid the rodent pressed under his armpit. After some days when the decomposed rodent started emitting very foul smell, Abotani called Mopin and told her that he is about to die and that is why he is smelling bad like this.

Tani bedu si, Tani opo si (this body and soul of mine)

Bedu namsie, yibi yeke (has started stinking)

Opo namba e reya yeku (and decompose)

Nog Tani pumsi gibolo (if I die)

Ngo tani romo be hibolo (perish as such)

Ngom nyigo be gosa dedo ye (can you create me)

Ngom hogo be gosa dedo ye (or compensate)

Hearing this Mopin got apprehensive as Abotani was the only human being on earth and his death could bring troubles for her. Hence, he ordered Diyi Tami to release Abotani and his dog.

The Gift of Seeds from Mopin-Moji

During his short stay, Abotani had observed the prosperity in the land of Mopin. After being released Abotani demanded that he be compensated for being kept a prisoner and made to go through lots of hardships. Mopin agreed and as compensation offered some seeds of paddy and maize to Abotani. Abotani had no utensils to carry the seeds, so, the seeds were carried on the back of the earlobes of the dog. That's why the Galos still believed that the back of the dog's ear has assumed the present shape because of that incident. A new era in the history of Galo tribe began with Abotani and his dog's return from the land of Mopin with the seeds ushering in the beginning of agriculture for a settled life.

Abotani came back to Tani momen (human habitation) and sowed the seeds in a barren place called Abin-Bindo-Poko-Looto without even clearing (or cultivating) the place. After sowing the seeds, he went about living his life before roaming here to there. He did not take proper care of the seeds that he had sown. However, since the seeds were magical, they returned to the land of goddess Mopin and told Mopin that Abotani had sowed them in a barren place and did not take care of them afterwards. They further told her that Abotani even do not have any proper implements for cultivation (In some version the seeds are eaten up by the birds because the sowing place was without plant cover).

Abotani returns to the field but finds no signs of germination of even a single plant. He gets very angry and thinking that all the seeds were eaten up by the birds starts killing birds to check their stomach, but he could not find any trace of the seeds. After trying hard but not able to find the seeds, Abotani again goes to the place of Mopin and told her that the seeds had disappeared. Mopin reprimands him for his ignorance and negligence telling him that the seeds have returned to her as he has not taken good care of them. She even criticized Abotani for not having proper tools for cultivation.

Abotani after realising his mistake seeks advice from Mopin on how to acquire agricultural tools and cultivate properly. Mopin agreed and instructed Abotani to construct a Komduu Pora (a kind of fishing trap) at Yei-Yela-Buku, to catch Horam, (otter) who's Rampin (skin) could be exchanged for the agricultural tools. Mopin even gives a knife to Abotani for constructing Komduu (trap). Abotani followed all the instructions and successfully catches a Horam. Then he goes to Nyir Poro's (God of tools and implement) residence and offers the skin to him and in exchange get agricultural tools and implements like Eggi (axe), dao

(sword). After obtaining the tools Abotani starts clearing the forest for cultivation. (According to one version of the myth, in the second time the crops are damaged by horam i.e., otter and Abotani goes to the Mopin for the third time). As per the mythological beliefs, the land of Mopin is in the southern part of Abotani's land the land of Nyir Poro is in the northern part of Tani's land.

The Conflict with Taki and the Establishment of Jhum Cultivation

When Abotani started clearing a larger area of forest, Taki (Yapom-Yaji, the spirits of the forest appear before him and tell him to stop clearing the forest as they are the owner of the forest. It is believed that once Taki was the brother of Abotani, but they separated because their lifestyle diverged. Abotani owned the sunny slopes while Taki was the master of the deep forests. Hence, for this reason, Taki objected to Abotani's clearing the deep forest as it belonged to him.

Abotani, again sought the help of Mopin who agreed to help. However, when she requests Yapom Yaji to give some plot of land to Abotani, but Yapom-Yaji refused. Hence, Mopin devised a plan to snatch the whole land from Yapom-Yaji. She organised a competition between Abotani and Yapom-Yaji. According to the rules, some trees will be felled in the forest. When the trees will dry up it will be set on fire. In the middle of the burning forest Abotani and the Yapom-Yaji will have to stand. The one who will withstand the heat till the end will be declared winner and become the owner of the land. Before the competition started, Mopin secretly instructed Abotani to dig a pit where he could slip into under the cover of smoke when the fire catches the field.

Accordingly, Diyii-Taamii begins the competition by putting fire in the forest. Yapom-Yaji could not withstand the fire and came out of the fire accepting defeat. As instructed, Abotani slips into the pit secretly and comes out of it at the end and stands in the same position where he was standing in the beginning. Thus, Abotani wins the competition and becomes the master of the land. Now, freed from all the restrictions, Abotani starts cultivation by sowing seeds of 'Miillii-Amlii'. However, Taki, still not satisfied, requested Abotani to remember him (the spirits of the forests) and the Mopin goddess during the cultivation in the form of rituals and offerings. Thus, during cultivation, especially during felling of big trees, a ritual image called dwgoo is erected where a chicken is sacrificed to appease the deity of the forest. With the guidance and help of Diyii-Taami and Pinku-Pinte, Abotani prepared the image of Mopin who gave more seeds to Abotani.

This time Abotani successfully cultivates the field and reaps good harvest. Now he could support a family; so, he once again visits the land of Mopin but this time he asks for the hand of Diiyi Taamii, the beautiful daughter of Mopin for marriage which was consented by both Mopin and Diyii-Taamii. Thus, Diyii-Taamii and Abotani get married. The marriage ceremony is attended by the Mopin and other deities. Mopin presented agricultural tools, seeds, and precious stone to the couple. It is said that during those days a single grain had the power of preparing a pot full of rice. Both get married happily and begin a peaceful life. They did not have to work hard because of the magical power of the grains.

Later, Abotani married Rosi-Taamii, daughter of Diro (famine), because of which Diyii-Taamii goes back to her mother's place. In the absence of Diyii-Taamii, Rosi-Taamii prepares the magical grain improperly. She didn't know that a single grain could cook a pot full of rice. She used more than one grain and hence a large quantity of rice was produced. She was confused what to do with this extra quantity of rice. She allows Dirro-Kiibo (the hungry dog) to eat the excess rice. After that, Rosi-Taamii again prepares the rice by using only one grain, but this time the single grain does not produce any food and remains as it is. It was because, Dirro-Kiibo had eaten the magical power of the grain along with the rice. Due to this Abotani had to face famine for the first time and his situation was terrible.

Mopin and Diyii-Taamii learns about the miserable condition of Abotani, but still Diyii-Taamii was unwilling to return to Abotani. However, when Abotani requested a lot, Diyii-Taamii finally agrees. Nevertheless, she places some conditions for her returning which Abotani agrees. Accordingly, Rosi-Taamii was drowned into the river and Dirro-Kiibo was cut into pieces and thrown into a waterfall. In this task, Abotani was assisted by Ietum and Leero, the gods of war. Thereafter, Abotani made images of Mopin and other deities with the help of Diyii-Taamii and worshipped them. With this Abotani regains the favour of Mopin and all the other deities, and in return they along with Diyii-Taamii visits his place with the gifts of agricultural implement and different seeds, except the magical seed which had the power of preparing large quantity of food from one single grain. They also directed Abotani to celebrate Mopin every year. Abotani also obtained the power of cultivating a large area. Hence for that reason, Mopin is celebrated every year by the Galos during the sowing season, praying for good harvest and prosperity.

Cultural Significance and Jhum Cultivation

The Galo people approach to agriculture is still shaped by this myth, which emphasises the importance of respecting the spirits of the forests and preserving environmental harmony. Jhum cultivation is a way of life of the Galo people and goes beyond agriculture and sustenance measure. The struggle faced by Abotani while learning how to cultivate properly practice enjoins upon the Galo people to respect their agricultural land and the traditions that emerged from it. In fact, the major festival of the Galo people is the Mopin festival which is an agricultural festival where Mopin and other deities are still worshipped and prayed for bumper harvest. The myth emphasises the importance of reverence towards the deities, the agricultural process and ethical living as prerequisites for a happy and prosperous life.

Additionally, jhum cultivation serves as an integral force. Jhum cultivation requires a group effort whereby the villagers help each other in various stages of jhum cultivation such as clearing the forest, dibbling, sowing etc. Rituals and festivals associated with jhum cultivation strengthen the social bonding.

Conclusion

The rich and intricate legends of how Abotani started jhum cultivation offer insights into the traditions and culture of the Galo tribe. Jhum farming is a way of life for the Galo people that reflects their reverence for their gods and their environment as well as their ancestors. The

ritual, rites and social function associated with jhum cultivation- all emphasize the importance of group effort, respect for the land and promotes harmony in the society.

In conclusion, the Galo people's myth of jhum cultivation serves as a strong reminder of the intricate relationship that exists among culture, agriculture and the environment. It is evidence of the Galo people's strong ties to their homeland and their dedication to safeguarding their cultural legacy for coming generations.

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