

Paper Title: Festival, Ritual And Society: A Study Of Mopin Festival Of The Galo Tribe Of Arunachal Pradesh

Dr. Raihana Azmeera Sultana, Apu Kaur

Department Of Sociology, University Of Science And Technology Meghalaya, Meghalaya, India
M.A. Department Of Sociology, University Of Science And Technology Meghalaya, Meghalaya, India

Abstract:

Background: This paper analyses the relationship between festival, ritual and its cultural significance for a stronger community bonding. In this context, the Mopin festival observed by the Galo tribe of Arunachal Pradesh is discussed in the paper to understand how ritual becomes an important part of a festival not just as a religious sanction but also as a medium to create the collective conscience among the community.

Material and Methods: The study was descriptive in nature. The Galo tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, residing in Aalo, have been chosen as the universe and area of the study. The total duration of the study was six months. As the study was qualitative in nature, purposive sampling technique was used to interview thirty respondents. The age of the respondents ranged from twenty-five years to sixty years and above.

Results: Deep-rooted participation and emotional engagement regulate a festival to persist and flourish. A deeply embedded cultural tradition binds the Galo community together through shared beliefs, practices, and collective joy. Consistency in participation reflects cultural continuity. Rituals when attached with festival, boost spiritual core of a community enabling to maintain social cohesion and contribute in crafting a sense of belongingness.

Conclusion: Mopin is not just a cultural event but a deeply personal and spiritual tradition. People do not just attend, they actively participate. Whether it's dancing the Popir, preparing rituals, or cooking for the community, everyone contributes in their own meaningful way. The respondents described Mopin as a moment of harmony with nature, with ancestors, and with one another. It marks the beginning of a new agricultural cycle and represents hope, prosperity, and collective well-being.

Key Word: Ritual, Festival, Mopin Festival, Galo tribe, Belongingness

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I. Introduction

Festivals serve functions inherent to our social life and is a collaborative phenomenon. The goal of a festival is to articulate the group's legacy; it is a communicative event that actively engages participants and offers public performance and participation. Ritual is closely related to festivals. According to Rappaport, 'Ritual is defined as the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not encoded by the performers' (Kuutma, 1998). Festivals in the community serve as a prism, reflecting a range of facets of people's lives, including their priorities, fears, and faith (Priyanka Tamta 2014). Therefore, learning about festivals becomes crucial to developing a thorough grasp of any civilisation or culture.

Rituals, according to Emile Durkheim, are "social facts" that influence and are also influenced by society (Rao, 2006). Abstractly speaking, all rituals are believed to have the same purpose and meaning. They are social acts that convey and restore a society's collective consciousness, which is included in its set of beliefs. Radcliffe-Brown too follows Durkheim and claim that religious rites are crucial for preserving societal harmony and equilibrium (Rao, 2006). Rituals play a crucial role in shaping the festival experience. They provide structure, continuity, and a sense of sacredness or cultural significance. It is in this context that the Galos of Arunachal Pradesh observe the Mopin Festival.

The Mopin Festival, celebrated by the Galo community in Arunachal Pradesh, holds significant cultural and socio-economic importance. However, there is a lack of comprehensive research on the festival's historical context, rituals, and its impact on community cohesion and identity. This study aims to investigate the multifaceted aspects of the Mopin Festival, exploring how it fosters cultural continuity, promotes social interaction, and contributes to the local economy. Additionally, the research will address the challenges faced in preserving the festival amidst modernization and changing social dynamics. Understanding these dimensions will provide valuable insights into the cultural heritage of Arunachal Pradesh and inform policy interventions for the promotion and sustainability of traditional festivals. To explore out the significance of mopin festival for the community, an in-depth study was conducted.

In an ethnographic overview of the Mopin festival by Eli Doye (2016), the significance of Mopin festival that forms a part of the identity of the Galos and heritage of the indigenous community has been brought out. The festival which was confined to the villages and its jhum fields (shifting cultivation) where all village folks jointly celebrated it fulfilling all mandatory ritualistic formalities, has now moved out of the fields to the community spaces in the villages (Eli Doye, 2015). Eli Doye (2015) also mentioned about a significant change that took place regarding the date of its celebration. In earlier times, when the days for celebrating the Mopin festival was determined by the village priest through a custom called *Pepe Chikanam* in either of the days of April, now 5th of April every year has been fixed to celebrate the festival (Eli Doye, 2015).

II. Material And Methods

The 'Mopin Festival is an agricultural festival celebrated by the Galo tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, India that resides in East Siang and West Siang districts. It is a celebration of the harvesting season held in the Galo months of "Lumi" and "Luki", corresponding to March–April and the new year for the Galo tribe. The Galo tribe follow an animist religion called Donyi-Polo. Officially the date of the Mopin Festival is fixed on April 5, but the commencement of the preparation for celebration starts from 2 April and thus, after the main event (i.e. 5 April) it concludes on 7–8 April after the visiting of paddy field which is known as *Riga Alo*. For conducting the study, certain methods and techniques have been used and it shall be discussed as follows.

Universe of the study: The Galo tribe of Arunachal Pradesh for whom Mopin festival is one of their important events has been studied here. The Galo tribe is one of the 26 major tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, scattered in almost every part of the state (Eli Doye, 2015). Almost one-third of this Tibeto-Mongoloid group inhabits mainly in the three districts of East Siang, West Siang and Upper Subansiri in Arunachal Pradesh which are their home districts. Traditionally, the Galo people are animistic in nature and consider Nature/nature to be the ultimate power (Eli Doye, 2015). They have maintained their own 'customary' system of indigenous beliefs and practices since time immemorial, but it is now falling into oblivion mainly because many Galos have recently become Christians. In fact, these indigenous beliefs and practices were for long not even acknowledged as a form of religion. However, as a result of the indigenous transition in the recent past, which may today be seen as evidence of a reaction to globalisation, and thus as a manifestation of glocalisation, these have been recognised as indigenous religious practices and are considered as part of Galo religious as well as cultural identity. Such beliefs and practices of the Tani tribes including Galos have resulted in the emergence of an indigenous form of religion popularly known as Donyi-Poloism. This evolves from Donyi (Sun) and Polo (Moon), as these two celestial entities are considered as their gods and all supreme powers are believed to lie with the almighty Donyi and Polo.

Study design: The study was descriptive in nature. As the focus was to capture the idea of the people regarding the Mopin festival, a qualitative approach regulated the research. Interviews were conducted to collect the primary data for which structured interview schedule was prepared. This paper is a departure from the previous literatures as the views from the field and personal experiences was captured regarding the festival. Whereas the previous literatures only described the festival and the rituals without the people's personal shared experiences being discussed. The patterns observed were categorised in themes and presented here.

Study location: The study was based in Aalo, formerly known as Along, a headquarter of the West Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh. Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh consists of the Eastern Himalayan and Indo Myanmar biodiversity hotspots of the world. The population of Aalo is around 20,700 according to the 2011 census of India. Although the census data does not state the exact number of Galo tribe in the region, Aalo has a predominantly Galo population. Thus, the research area was selected as Aalo. The community area where the Mopin festival was observed this year was visited frequently to identify respondents.

Study duration: This paper is an outcome and a description based on the interviews recorded during the study duration of six months starting from November, 2024 to April, 2025. The study focussed on the effort and labour of the tribe during the planning, execution and aftermath of the festival.

Sample: As the study was qualitative in nature, purposive sampling technique was used to interview thirty respondents. The age of the respondents ranged from twenty-five years to sixty years and above. Among the thirty respondents, twenty were male and ten were female respondents. The respondents ranged from students, professional worker, home-makers, agricultural workers to retired/elderly personals. As the study emphasised on understanding the importance of the Mopin festival for the Galos, a varied range of people from the community were included to capture a holistic view.

Table-1: Number of respondents based on their occupation

Occupation	Number of respondents
Students pursuing higher studies	6
Professional workers	6
Home-makers	6
Agricultural workers	6
Retired/ elderly personals	6

Table no. 1 shows the distribution of the respondents according to the occupation that they hold. Pseudonyms are used to maintain the confidentiality of the respondents.

III. Discussion:

Practices, rituals and organization:

The main Goddess worshiped during the festival is called Mopin Ane. She is important to the Galos who is believed to bring in fertility and prosperity. Mr. T, an elderly farmer indicated at a series of rituals that take place in the celebration. He told, 'The creation of the Mopin idol as one of the central rituals. The idol is carefully crafted as it symbolizes the deity and becomes the focal point for worship and offerings during the festival'. He and most of the respondents expressed that its preparation is seen as a sacred act, carried out with devotion and precision by selected community members. Mr. V, an employee of the government mentions about the ritual of sacrifice associated with the Mopin festival. He explained, 'A Mithun is sacrificed which is believed to bring prosperity and ward off negative forces. But before this, sacred chants are performed by a priest to invite the Gods and seek blessings and set a sacred tone for the day'. The male member performs the sacrificial rituals. However, one member is selected as the head of the celebration, known as *Pingi-Neri*, by the village priest. The celebration was not a yearly event earlier as the date of celebration and the *Pingi-Neri* were decided by the village priest based on certain customs. There has been a shift in the present time when it is celebrated every year on a fixed date.

It can be gathered that rituals are symbolic communication with the unknown which is the focal point of the Mopin festival. The role of the ritual is more important than the mere observance of the festival. The festival of Mopin is a perfect portrayal of a balancing act between cultural performances in the form of the Popir dance and reverence towards the main act of sacrifice and spiritual communication with the unseen.

Some of the respondents emphasized on their role in the preparatory and organizational aspects. Coordinating logistics, managing community resources, and helping maintain order during the festivities is maintained by the male members. Mr. W spoke, 'Organizing committee, made up of dedicated local community members, ensures that the festival runs smoothly by carefully planning, arranging venues, coordinating events, scheduling dance keeping in mind the spiritual and ritualistic aspect of the festival.

The meetings of the organizing groups develop a sense of responsibility among the people. This also implies that the festival is deeply valued and it is not just a mere departure from their everyday routines. The younger ones who take up responsibility or otherwise actively participate learns about the nitty-gritty related to the rituals that needs to be strictly followed. Hence, the festival becomes a medium of passing on their tradition and culture. Such participation also reflects on the emotional ties that the people of the tribe feel towards each other and to their ancestors.

Mrs. B, who is a banker described, 'Women are primarily responsible for the preparation of "Poka", the traditional rice beer that holds cultural and ritual importance during the festival. This task is more than just brewing it is seen as an art passed down through generations, requiring skill, patience, and care'. The respondents also stated that meal for communal feast is prepared by women. Mrs. B, a home-maker also indicated about a key ritual known as *Eete*. She told, 'Eete is a ritual where everyone is welcomed by applying a paste on the face by others as a form of greetings when they come to participate in the festival. The paste is prepared by mixing rice flour and water by the women'. Given that rice is the Galo people's primary staple food, this is seen as a sacred rite that represents love, purity, and communal cohesion.

The distinct role attributed to the male and female members speaks about the division of labour, which in Durkheim's sense can be considered mechanical solidarity existing in the tribe. It also brings us to the understanding that in the present times we cannot claim that only organic solidarity exists in the modern society. The participants when they are within the tribe organising a traditional festival, then mechanical solidarity is at play. Whereas, when the same participants, move out of their region, to be a part of the larger community and take up higher education or profession according to their ability, they immediately serve the purpose of organic solidarity.

Participation and a sense of belongingness:

Majority of respondents shared that they actively participate in the Mopin Festival and their deep involvement in the activities associated with it. Mr. W, who is also a government employee responded that he attends the festival every year because he feels close to his culture and his people when he participates. Most of

the respondents shared that they have attended the festival for many years, with some noting that they have been part of it over thirty times. All respondents reported having attended the Mopin festival, reflecting its strong cultural presence and importance in their lives. Mrs. A, an elderly lady reflects 'Mopin is not just an event but a tradition that has accompanied us throughout our lives from childhood into adulthood and older days'.

However, a few respondents have stated that they have attended the festival fewer times, with some mentioning as few as four times. Mr. P, a professional in a private company expressed, 'Since, I have to stay outside of my region because of work I cannot attend the festival every time but the festival is very dear to me'. Some younger respondents have expressed that due to their ongoing education outside that also miss out sometimes from participating in the festival. Miss E who is a college student in Assam shared, 'I miss the Popir dance and dressing our traditional attire for the festival'

Mrs. C, who is a housewife expressed, 'Dancing Popir is not just entertainment it is a symbolic act that brings the community together, strengthens cultural identity, and celebrates the collective spirit of Mopin'. The enthusiasm of the younger generation to participate in the festival reaffirms that culture and tradition still remains an integral part of one's life. It authenticates their commitment to culture and acceptance of their social identity.

Recent development in the observance of the festival

An older priest from the village Mr. X, stated, 'Earlier the festival did not take place on the 5th of April. It was decided by the priest through certain calculation. Now guests are also invited, competitions take place which was earlier not known. It also was celebrated in the fields but not anymore. Participants were also much higher than the present times.' He expressed that the festival continues to be celebrated in its traditional form, with the same rituals, dances, and ceremonies passed down through generations.

Mrs. C, a teacher also stated, 'We can witness a decline in mass participation, especially in the larger communal activities like preparing the idol. Fewer youth actively participate or take part in all aspects of the festival'. Mrs. D, a house-maker states that the presence of the youth helps keep the spirit of the Mopin Festival alive and safe for future generations. Some of the respondents hinted at a slight departure from the full traditional dress that was earlier worn and contemporary dressing pattern has entered. The data reveals that the festival is entirely organized and managed by the local community, with no direct involvement from government bodies.

Festivals comprise of events where some are intended to enhance social interaction and pass on traditions to the younger generation. On the other hand, the rituals associated with festivals are beliefs that a collective conscience can make a community stronger. It reinforces the sense of ethnic identity and belongingness to the community and the region. The Mopin Festival is not merely an event, but a deeply embedded cultural tradition that binds the Galo community together through shared beliefs, practices, and collective joy. The sacred acts such as the sacrificial rituals and the crafting of the Mopin idol are treated with reverence, reinforcing the spiritual foundation of the festival.

Significance of the festival for the Galos

The vast majority of respondents equate the Mopin Festival with prosperity and the arrival of the harvest season, indicating its profound cultural and emotional significance. According to the majority of participants, Mopin is a festival that celebrates the health and interdependence of humans, plants, and animals.

It is seen not merely as a ritual or tradition but as a meaningful expression of gratitude and hope for continued abundance. Mr. T, an elderly man expressed, 'Mopin also symbolises joy, community building, and the reaffirmation of customs and shared values and the emotional warmth is felt by every who participates'. The function of the festival is believed to unite the people and maintain cultural identity, as indicated by some of the respondents.

Ms. A, a student of B.A. Law remarked, 'Everyone looks up to participate in the Popir dance. It is our favourite part of the celebration, where we all dress up in our traditional dress attire specially designed for the festival'. She further states that it is not just about performance it is a shared cultural expression that brings everyone together, young and old alike.

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IV. Conclusion

The Mopin Festival is a living tradition that is intricately entwined with the Galo people's social, cultural, and spiritual lives; it is more than just a seasonal celebration. The fundamental elements of Mopin, a celebration of prosperity, reenactment of faith, and a powerful display of unity remain constant despite minor changes in the celebration of the festival. Through dancing, observing rituals, and common ideals, the Galo community is united

by this living legacy. Everyone, young and old, views it as an opportunity to re-establish connections with their culture, their faith, and one another. The rituals, the Popir dance, and even the cuisine have profound significance.

The festival planning is entirely community-driven. One of the most striking findings was the complete absence of government involvement. Every aspect from spiritual preparation to logistics is handled by local organizing committees. This reflects a strong sense of cultural self-reliance and pride in maintaining tradition independently.

Deep-rooted participation and emotional engagement among the community members is one of the most striking themes that emerged from the data. Rather than being passive attendees, most respondents described themselves as active contributors to the festival. The festival showcases a balanced division of cultural labour. Men primarily handle the sacrificial rituals and logistical setup, while women are central to hospitality brewing Poka, cooking, and participating in cultural expressions like dance and Eete rituals. Both roles are viewed as equally vital to the celebration's success.

Everyone is greeted with applying *Ette*, a paste made of rice flour, on their face. This is regarded as a sacred rite that represents love, purity, and social cohesion because rice is the Galo people's primary staple food. All households and the entire community are said to benefit from the Mopin festival's richness and success. The customs surrounding the Mopin celebration chase out evil spirits and bestow blessings, peace, and prosperity to everyone.

Galo people dress up in their finest white traditional clothing for the festival. A local drink called *Apong/Poka* (an alcoholic beverage popular in the state prepared by fermentation of rice) is generally distributed among the participants in a bamboo cup and a variety of meals are served, made of rice which is known as *Aamin* which contains meat and bamboo shoot.

At this event, participants dance the Popir, a traditional dance from the area. The sacrifice of the Mithun, a bovine animal unique to North East India and Burma, is the primary event of the Mopin celebration. Following the sacrifice, the mithun's blood is brought back to the villages and households as a blessing.

Continuity with minor shifts is visible in the celebration of the festival. While most respondents felt that Mopin has remained true to its roots, some acknowledged minor changes. These included a decrease in mass participation, particularly among the younger generation, and a shift in dress codes, with some adopting more modern styles. However, these changes are not seen as undermining the festival's authenticity rather, they reflect a community subtly adapting to the times while preserving its essence.

Youth participation is encouraging but could be deeper. Most respondents felt hopeful about the younger generation's involvement, especially in visible roles like dancing and helping with preparations. However, a few voiced concerns that modern distractions and migration might gradually weaken deeper engagement with rituals over time.

This collective response reflects a strong sense of self-reliance and cultural ownership among the people. The organization of Mopin is seen as a community-driven effort, handled by local committees and volunteers who take pride in preserving their traditions without external dependence.

In the end, Mopin continues to be a powerful symbol of identity, unity, and gratitude for the Galo people. It shows how culture can be both rooted in the past and ready for the future if it is cared for by the community that lives it.

Mopin is a powerful force for community bonding. Whether through rituals, food, dance, or shared effort, the festival brings people together. It reinforces identity, nurtures belongingness, and strengthens the fabric of communal life. Some mentioned that Mopin is a time when people reconnect, work together, and enjoy each other's company. It helps create a strong feeling of belonging and togetherness. Mopin is not just about tradition it is also about bringing people closer and making the community stronger.

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