

# MATRIX

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## A LABYRINTH OF THOUGHTS ON THE CROSSROAD

Bompi Riba

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An event that stays in the memory; that evokes a conundrum and enlightens one to see one's culture in a new light is worth documenting. But it is seldom done so when it involves an ordinary person who is but an insignificant member of a community of a prodigious state of a big country. He is but a diminutive voice like a tiny globule of the Universe. His story surely does not affect the course of the Nation's history or even the State's history and remains just 'his' story and fades into oblivion. And his death, whether natural or unnatural is again an insignificant event except for his family members who will gradually recover from that unpleasant experience and move on.

The event that led to the germination of this deep reflection was the death of a tribal man, a Galo to be precise. The mysterious events or just pure imaginations that were associated with the poor man's untimely death

being the talk of the small town leading to the bewilderment of the community, mostly second generation Christians who were still holding on to the fragile thread of their ancestors' indigenous faith unseals the unresolved cultural conflicts that in fact coalesce to create a not so simple but a rather complicated belief system. Yours truly presents a perspective among many perspectives that were unrecorded but were verbally exchanged among the onlookers at the funeral service. A humble attempt is therefore made to assess the traditional beliefs of the community that seem supernatural and yet logical and they are pitted against rational and scientific facts.

Amidst frequent allegations on Christianity for deviating the indigenous Tani people from their original roots and embracing an alien faith and culture, there has emerged a new breed of 'hybrid natives' who are not wholly practising Christianity nor endorsing indigenous faith. Occupying that space of belonging to both culture and yet feeling a sense of loss at one and alienated at the other have created a flustered generation that are at loggerheads in corroborating their identity. While the general understanding among them is that they are Galo by virtue of being born in that community and a Christian because of the faith in which they are brought up. The matter of contention, however, among their pure breeding counterparts is that one cannot be a tribal and an alien worshipper at the same time, since Christianity is considered to be a foreign religion. So in recent times, demands have also been made of the hybrid natives to surrender their Scheduled Tribe status and become a

minority community which to the latter is absurd and offensive. It is to be noted that language is one of the badges of one's ethnic identity. Galo churches play a crucial role in preserving and promoting the language. The religious services are conducted in Galo and even hymns are sung in the same language. They also conduct craft-making competitions which encourage the congregation, especially the women to weave gale or a traditional sarong. Some of the core cultural practices of the indigenous faith have been given up but much have been appropriated by them to continue the legacy of their ancestors such as the patrilineal method of naming the children to trace the geneology of their ancestor that is one of the unique traditional features of the Galo tribe. A traditional Galo name always has two syllables. The first syllable comprises the last syllable of the father's name, such as the name Marto has two syllables 'Mar' and 'to'. While 'Mar' is the last syllable of his father's name who must have been a Gomar or a Tamar and the last syllable 'to' of Marto shall be the first syllable of his son Tobom (To + bom) and daughter Topi (To + pi). In recent times three-syllable names such as Damaira (Dam + ai + ra), Marsona (Mar + so + na), Linusa (Li + nu + sa) and Marconi (Mar + co + ni) have also been observed among the Christian Galos as well as indigenous Galos. However, among the Christian Galos a trend has developed to give their children two names that is characteristic of their hybrid culture. For instance, 'Marto Samuel', where 'Marto' is the first name and 'Samuel' is the middle name which is, then, followed by the surname. A cursory look in to

the characteristics of the Galo tribe is pertinent to investigate the death of the Galo man who was at the time of his death the Bazaar President of Likabali that still shares a porous border with Assam. According to Eli Doye in his *Myths from Northeast India: Functional Perspective of Galo Myths in a Changing Context*, the nomenclature Galo has been derived from their ancestor's feat of crossing the Golo Yorbe, a mountainous range which is near the International Boundary that India shares with China. He also adds that this version of the origin story is, however, contested because of the fact that the Galos do not have recorded documents supporting the story of their migration or the inception of their community. Whatever information has survived was passed down from one generation to another orally, thus, resulting in different versions of the migration story. The generally agreed argument is that the Galo tribe has descended from the line of the Tibeto-Burman group of the Mongoloid race. And as any tribal communities of the world, they have their own myth of the origin of the universe. Though there are slight variations in the myth among the different clans of Galo tribe, most subscribe to the belief that they have descended from Jimi Ane (mother Jimi), the creator. She created Medo (the sky) and Sichi or Sisi (the Earth). Their union gave birth to their first son who was called Sibuk, whose son was called Buksin, Buksin's son was called Sintu, Sintu's son was called Turi and Turi's son was called Rini or Tani whom the Galo tribe deems as Abo Tani, the Father of Mankind. (42 - 44) However on careful observation of the myth it is noted that the first

child of Medo (abo or father) and Sichi or Sisi (Ane or mother) derived his name Sibuk (Spring water) from the second syllable of the mother's name in contradiction to the patrilineal method of the tribe.

Like all Tani tribes (Adi, Apatani, Galo, Nyishi and Tagin) the Galo tribe also worships Donyi (the Sun god) and Polo (the Moon god) for fertility, prosperity and protection from natural as well as unnatural calamities. According to Dr. Eli Doye in *Myths From North East India: Functional Perspective of Galo: Myths in a Changing Context*:

Besides, Donyi-Polo, the Galo believe in the presence of diverse spirits or deities who are associated with natural elements and are believed to defend their own surroundings. Basically, these spirits are of two types – the benevolent and malevolent spirits who are commonly called uyi regardless of their nature. Citumjore, ite-bote, ali-ampir, peka, kate, etc, are considered by the Galo as benevolent spirits as they are appeased to seek their blessings and protection. On the other hand, doli-doga, rodu, gute-heder, kale, polle, etc. are malevolent spirits who are propitiated to be considerate (74).

The Galo tribe believes that there are supernatural powers that are apparently in control of everything in nature such as forests, rivers and mountains. So it is customary for them to conduct rituals such as 'roksin (chicken-liver divination) or reksin (pig liver divination) or pip chikanam (determining through divination of boiled egg)' (Doye, 75) before clearing



forest area for jhum cultivation or fishing or any hunting expedition. These rituals are performed by the village elders and nyibu (shaman). However in the present times such ritualistic practice is declining.

Among the traditional Galo the belief is that after death, the souls of men shall travel to uyu-moko or orom- moko, the land of the souls. There they shall meet all their dead relatives and enjoy the same status as they did on earth. They will have the need for the same things that they possessed on earth. Therefore the family of the deceased makes it sure to bury all his prized possessions along with the body. They also place food and water near the grave so that the soul will not remain hungry in his journey to the uyu-moko. So basically the Galo believe in the continuity of life after death where the soul after experiencing another span of life shall again die. In contrast to the indigenous Galo the Christian Galo believe in the Holy Trinity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. And following the Book of Genesis they have rested their faith in the Creation Story where God commanded and the Universe and everything in the Universe was created. And unlike the popular Galo belief that Tani is the father of humankind, they have accepted the Christian myth of Adam and Eve as the progenitor of mankind, though they still continue to consider Tani as the ancestor from whom they have originally descended. They hold onto the belief that they were gentiles who were saved when they accepted Christ, the Son of the Almighty God as their personal Saviour. Their belief in the Christian doctrine of the soul being judged for the man's deed on Earth when alive

also differs from the indigenous Galo belief. Instead of the soul living another span of life in uyu-moko as propagated by the typical Galo belief-system, the soul will either be sent to heaven or hell based on the kind of life lived on Earth.

With this lead in to the difference in the belief-system between the indigenous Galo and Christian Galo being established, it seems sensible now to present the case of Karto<sup>1</sup>, the then Bazaar President of Likabali in the year 2009. It was the season of election and so on the day of his disappearance; he was busy campaigning for the prospective MLA. He mysteriously vanished from the house of the fellow campaigner who claimed to have dined with him till 11 at night. Thereafter he went to sleep with the host's son who later claimed that the deceased had covered him with a blanket before lying down next to him. But the very next day the host and his family found the guest missing. They immediately thought that he must have gone back to his home and so they did not look for him. When his family could not contact him the whole day, they started making enquiry and no one seem to have even a faint idea of his whereabouts. In this way two days and two nights passed without any success of locating him. Subsequently there was heavy downpour for two consecutive days which made the search arduous. And finally after repeated attempts he was tracked down in the thickly forest covered hill. His body was found entangled amidst bamboos in the bamboo grove.

There were several conjectures whispered among the grieving congregation during the funeral

service. Yours truly overheard them speaking about the possibility of 'murder' in connection to the competitive political scenario but since the father of the deceased did not permit post-mortem to be carried out on the body, that speculation could never be confirmed. Another opinion that was shared among the mourners who were mostly Second Generation Christian Galo was that he might have been taken by Yapom. According to Galo-English Dictionary, Yapom is a:

fairie; demon; a potentially dangerous spirit who is believed to live in banyan trees, can fly, controls wild goats and stags, and who has the power to snatch people away and sometimes kill them. At the same time, some yapoms are benevolent and may save people from death.

It has already been mentioned above that the Galo tribe believe in the existence of supernatural powers that abide in various locations in nature. Yapom is one such spirit and the Galo also have a popular myth of the Yapom that she was the sister of Abo Tani. When the land was divided between them, Tani was given the good and fertile land and she was given the difficult terrains, thick forests, hills, mountains and rivers. It is said that Yapoms have world of their own just like the human world. They marry and have children too. They are very protective of their world. While Tani, being the first human being represents the materialistic world, Yapom represents the spiritual realm or the metaphysical world. They are believed to have made their abode in huge trees such as the hirek<sup>2</sup>. Though human beings cannot see them with their naked eyes, they can see the entire activities of the human beings.

Until and unless they are offended and provoked, they do not interfere in the lives of men. That also explains why Galo people conduct a ritual called digo linnam such as sacrificing animals or offering coins made of bamboo after hunting. They also conduct digo linnam by offering eggs or chicken to the spirit that is in charge of the forest before cutting a huge tree. And according to the Galo belief if such rituals are not conducted then Yapom gets offended and it gives punishment to men by damaging their property, field and livestock. Sometimes it even kidnaps the offender too. So it is a general practice of the offenders and their family to negotiate with the help of the nyibu<sup>3</sup> by conducting rituals to appease the spirit.

There have also been claims of Yapom being benevolent and a keden<sup>4</sup> of men. One Ngukkir Ori from Yigi Kaum village in West Siang district has claimed to have been kidnapped by three or four male Yapoms. He has avowed that he was taken to a huge tree where he had witnessed the world of the Yapom. There he was attended by a female Yapom who told her male counterparts that the captive is her keden and therefore, she insisted them to let him go free. He was then brought down from the tree by the male Yapoms and finally he was set free. However when he came to his senses, he found himself completely naked. This account of the old man confirms the traditional belief that there are both benevolent and malevolent Yapoms.

When enquired if the Yapom kills its captive, the response gathered was mixed. One of the common responses was that the Yapom kidnaps but it does not

kill its captive. He leaves his victim in deep jungle all by himself and usually the unfortunate person dies of heart attack. This response somehow seems to correlate with the second conjecture of the mourners who had attended the funeral service of Karto. The compelling thing about that observation was that that conjecture with firm conviction was made by Second and Third Generation Christian Galo people. That actually signifies how they are yet holding on to the cultural beliefs of their ancestors in spite of their different belief system. While the Christian missionary present in the deceased's house spoke about sin and God's will, he also did not totally deny the involvement of the spirit's work, though he did not openly blame Yapom for the cause of the death.

However on further enquiry, one disturbing information also surfaced about Karto and that was his frequent hallucination of Assam Police following him. He had confided about it to his close friends even on the night he had disappeared. Keeping this aspect in mind, a close study of the social scenario of Likabali, then under West Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh is imperative. The issue that used to trouble the local population back in the 90s still continues to persist even today after a decade. They are repeatedly threatened by boundary related disputes and the lackadaisical attitude of the successive ruling parties in the Government of India towards their predicaments has only aggravated their dilemma and confusion. The frequent meddling of the Assam Police and government officials of Assam in the internal affairs of the locals have also resulted with the latter losing their confidence in the utility of Arunachal

Pradesh Police (APP) in particular and the administration of the Government of India in general. While the state of Assam has taken advantage of the historical documents of British and Ahom rulers to prove their assertion that the claim of the Galo tribe as the natives of Likabali was based on purported occupation of land in Assam; the Galo tribe, unfortunately, like all the tribes of Tani clan do not have a script of their own to record their history of migration and settlement. This lack of script and lack of education of the early settlers have jeopardized the future of the locals of Likabali as they are made perpetual handicaps in the hands of recorded history. A chance meeting with Karto's father, the bespectacled ato with his decrepit body lying on the mat placed near the hearth of the traditional Galo kitchen enlightens one about this piece of geography called 'the No Man's Land' which apparently was the area between Likabali and Sonarighat. It was once upon a time covered with thick forests but the entire landscape changed because of the earthquake in 1950. Several mounds were flushed off by the gushing waters of the river Brahmaputra and its tributaries which were galvanized by the highly calamitous earthquake. And to this day one can witness the huge sandy residuals of that tsunami like situation. There were hardly any occupants in that belt and the area around the vicinity of Likabali was covered with thick dense forest which stood as natural sentinels around it. But with the establishment of the North Eastern Railway line between North-Lakhimpur and Jonai in 1958; the wild bushes and jungle were cleared

and gradually there was mushrooming of settlement all over that area. By late 1950s the flood victims of Sibsagar district started developing the areas between Dhemaji and Sisibargaon. And by early 1960s, as a result of agricultural revolution, the Galo tribe who were primarily involved in shifting cultivation migrated from the hills to Likabali and areas around it to carry out their wet rice cultivation. In the mean time while the Galo people started developing deep attachment to the area; the Assamese counterparts were developing shopping centres and government buildings in Silapathar as a result of the laying of the railway tracks. Silapathar came under the jurisdiction of Dhemaji and soon the awareness of the limitation of land came to the surface and the issue of Assam-Siang Demarcation got pronounced by the close of 1950. Assam had the advantage of being an established state with revenue departments and recorded history to preside over the boundary demarcation of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, which was then NEFA (North East Frontier Agency). And Arunachal Pradesh, then NEFA, accused the Assam government of being arbitrary in the 1951 Notification of the boundary as the locals of NEFA were then not consulted. While the State of Assam adamantly stuck to the demarcation as stated in the First Schedule of the Constitution of India; the State of Arunachal Pradesh proposed for the re-adjustment of the Inter-State boundary taking into consideration the traditional and customary right exercised by different tribes of the state in the foothills adjoining the state of Assam. And the conflict still continues to persist.

This ceaseless conflict seems to have no permanent solution and the repercussions seem to worsen on both sides of the boundary with the passing of time. Examining the crisis of the citizens of Likabali; one comes across complaints of the locals being harassed by the civil as well as police officials of Dhemaji and Silapathar frequently. The alleged raid of Malini complex and demolition of the pandal and a storeroom that was built in 1994 on April 5th, 2012 is one such case. The recent report of the Assamese news channel DY365 on 2nd August, 2021 on how five villages of Likabali District have encroached the Assam land is a case of false accusation according to the afflicted villagers. While the locals of Likabali accuse the Assam police personnel of violating the status-quo; the Assamese counterparts exculpate and vindicate their act as an eviction drive against the encroachers.

Therefore one can assume that as the Bazaar President of Likabali Karto must have had several confrontations with the Assam police which might have had affected his psyche. He was also a chronic alcoholic and he probably might have had schizophrenia too. Schizophrenia is a long term medical disorder which is characterised by the patient losing touch with reality and withdrawing in to the world of fantasy. Karto's family had also admitted to the fact of him having hallucination of Assam Police following him everywhere. But they had never suspected his mental disorder to be schizophrenia as they were not even aware of such a disease, let alone the alien terminology. With time his death, which was shrouded in mystery, got lost in



oblivion. His family members moved on but to the conflicted soul standing in a crossroad, that dark rainy day evokes a labyrinth of thoughts that merge with the enigma of the dead man to only further the agitation within.

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### **Glossary:**

- 1 - Karto = name has been changed to maintain anonymity
- 2 - hirek = banyan tree
- 3 - Nyibu = shaman
- 4 - keden = friend

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