



CUSTOMARY INHERITANCE AMONG THE GALO TRIBE: CONTINUITY AND LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT The Galo Tribe is one of the prominent indigenous communities inhabiting West Siang, East Siang, Lower Siang, Lepa Rada, and Upper Subansiri in Arunachal Pradesh. Traditionally, inheritance practices have been rigid and predominantly patrilineal. However, the growing influence of the modern legal system has led to a gradual transformation in these patterns. The tribe's socio-political and economic life is governed by customary norms administered through the village council, the Keba. These orally transmitted laws, preserved through folktales and rituals, have long shaped inheritance norms and entitlements. Despite the absence of formal codification, they remain deeply embedded in the socio-cultural fabric. While core customary principles persist, they have shown adaptability under the forces of modernization. The authority of the Keba continues to be significant in resolving inheritance disputes, ensuring social cohesion, dignity, and collective well-being. Thus, this study examines the traditional inheritance system of the Galo and its evolving dynamics.

KEYWORDS : Customary Law, Inheritance, Galo Tribe, Gender.

INTRODUCTION

The socio-cultural life of the Galo is deeply rooted in a rich tradition of customary laws, which regulate various aspects of social organization, including inheritance, property ownership, and dispute resolution. These customary norms, transmitted orally through generations in the form of myths, folktales, and ritual practices, have historically functioned as the primary framework governing the tribe's socio-political and economic institutions. Inheritance among the Galo has traditionally been characterized by a rigid patrilineal structure, wherein property rights are largely vested in male members of the family. The distribution of both movable and immovable property is guided not only by gender but also by factors such as seniority, responsibility, and filial obligations. The village council, locally known as the Keba, plays a crucial role in administering these customary laws and adjudicating disputes, thereby ensuring social harmony and continuity of traditional norms.

However, the increasing interface with modern legal frameworks, education, and socio-economic transformations has begun to influence these long-standing practices. While the core principles of customary law remain intact, there is a gradual shift towards more flexible interpretations, particularly in relation to gender roles and inheritance rights. This evolving dynamic reflects a broader process of negotiation between tradition and modernity within the Galo society. In this context, the present study seeks to critically examine the traditional inheritance system of the Galo tribe and its contemporary transformations. It aims to explore how customary practices are adapting to changing socio-legal realities while continuing to uphold the values of community cohesion, justice, and cultural identity.

1.1 Objectives

The study has following objectives

- To examine the traditional inheritance system of the Galo Tribe.
- To assess the impact of modernization and formal legal systems on the inheritance patterns of the Galo society.

1.2 Methodology

Data for the present study were drawn from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were collected through systematic field surveys using observation, biographical methods, and case studies. Oral traditions such as myths, legends, and folktales were documented from village elders through structured and unstructured interviews to understand the origins, beliefs, and chronicles underlying customary laws and practices in the study area. Secondary data were sourced from relevant official Act, reports, records, scholarly articles, and other available published and unpublished materials. The study is confined to three districts of Arunachal Pradesh, namely Lower Siang, Upper Subansiri, and West Siang (undivided West Siang, including Lepa Rada district). For the purpose of the study, one rural and one urban area were selected from each district.

1.2 The Traditional Inheritance System of the Galo Tribe

The institution of Hwijv (inheritance rights) among the Galo Tribe is governed by a well-structured system of customary norms that regulate the transmission of parental property across generations. These norms are deeply embedded in the socio-cultural fabric of the

community and reflect a predominantly patrilineal orientation. The distribution of property is primarily determined on the basis of gender, with males occupying a central position in inheritance. However, the system is not exclusively rigid; factors such as seniority, individual conduct, and the extent of filial responsibility; particularly the care and support provided to aging parents. It plays a significant role in determining entitlements. Within this customary framework, property is broadly categorized into movable and immovable forms.

a) Immovable Property

Within the customary framework of the Galo Tribe, inheritance rights have historically exhibited a pronounced gender bias, particularly with regard to immovable property. Customary rules have traditionally not recognized daughters as rightful heirs to immovable assets such as land, forests, and other forms of ancestral property. Instances of daughters inheriting paternal immovable property are extremely rare and occur only under exceptional circumstances, most notably in the absence of male offspring. In such cases, the transfer of property to a daughter is not treated as a normative right but rather as a situational adjustment to an otherwise rigid patrilineal system.

Historically, in situations where a couple had no male heir, the prevailing practice was for property to devolve upon a male member of the same clan. This arrangement often resembled a form of social or functional adoption, wherein the male relative assumed responsibility for the elderly couple and, in return, became the successor to their property. Thus, inheritance in such contexts was closely tied to clan continuity and the preservation of patrilineal lineage, rather than individual entitlement. Despite these restrictions on immovable property, daughters are not entirely excluded from inheritance. They may claim certain categories of movable property, particularly those associated with the maternal line.

b) Movable Property

It is further differentiated according to its material value and cultural significance. Items of high prestige and symbolic importance include Dasw (an antique saucapan representing wealth and status), Yoksi (a traditional sword), Talv (a brass bowl), and other valued objects such as Bartv-Barba, Ber, and Boreh (traditional brass plates). These objects are not merely economic assets but also markers of social identity, lineage continuity, and familial prestige. A secondary category comprises items of relatively lesser value, including everyday utensils, trays, and various ornaments and beads such as Doksi, Dogn, v Lwsum, Dokpin, and Raaji, which, although less prestigious, still hold cultural and personal significance.

Daughters can inherit certain categories of movable property, particularly those associated with the maternal line, such as traditional ornaments including bead necklaces, earrings, bangles, and other personal adornments. However, these rights are conditional rather than absolute. The transfer of such movable assets is governed by specific ritual obligations and customary practices. In most cases, a daughter is required to perform ceremonial duties, including organizing a feast and offering of Hobo (Mithun) and How (Ox / Cow) with rituals to her parents or family. It is only upon the completion of these customary obligations that she becomes formally entitled to inherit her mother's ornaments and related movable property.

1.3 Inheritance Rights

Customarily, the eldest male member of the family is accorded a privileged position in inheritance and is often entitled to a larger or more valuable share of both movable and immovable property. In certain instances, the youngest son may also receive preferential treatment, particularly in relation to specific categories of property. However, such patterns are not universally fixed. In practice, the actual distribution of property tends to be influenced by pragmatic and ethical considerations, especially the fulfilment of filial obligations. The son who assumes primary responsibility for the care, maintenance, and well-being of the parents is often granted a greater share or more valuable assets, regardless of his birth order. A daughter and son-in-law are not entitled to claim inheritance rights over parental property solely on the basis of having provided care and support to the parents in their old age. Such acts of service, while socially valued, do not confer legal or customary ownership rights; instead, they may be acknowledged through the granting of a nominal reward or token of appreciation.

In case of the sale or transfer of both movable and immovable property without the consent of immediate or nearest family members is generally discouraged within the customary system. Any such unauthorized transaction may be subject to review and can be revoked, with provisions for restitution or refund, thereby ensuring collective family control and safeguarding ancestral property from unilateral decisions.

This flexible yet normatively guided system highlights the intrinsic linkage between rights and duties within the Galo customary framework. Inheritance is not viewed merely as a legal entitlement but as a moral reward for fulfilling social and familial responsibilities. Thus, the institution of Hwijv reflects a dynamic interplay between tradition, social values, and practical considerations, ensuring both continuity and adaptability within the indigenous system of property relations.

1.4 Legal Implication and Changing Dynamism

The institution of inheritance among the Galo Tribe has increasingly come into interaction with formal legal frameworks, particularly the Assam Frontier (Administration of Justice) Regulation, 1945, Article 371H, and the Arunachal Pradesh (Land Settlement and Records) Act, 2000. These legal instruments have significant implications for the functioning and transformation of customary inheritance practices amongst the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh.

The Assam Frontier (Administration of Justice) Regulation, 1945 provides for the recognition and application of customary laws in the administration of justice. It empowers village authorities to adjudicate disputes based on indigenous customs, thereby legitimizing traditional institutions such as the village council Keba in matters of inheritance. This regulation has historically ensured the continuity of Galo customary inheritance practices by allowing community norms to prevail over formal codified laws in personal matters.

The Arunachal Pradesh (Land Settlement and Records) Act, 2000 marks a significant shift towards formalization and regulation of land ownership. It introduces mechanisms for land settlement, documentation, and record-keeping, which were traditionally absent in Galo society where land rights were governed by customary norms and oral traditions. The Act has important implications for inheritance, particularly in relation to immovable property. By encouraging individual ownership and legal documentation, it gradually transforms the customary collective and lineage-based system into a more formalized and legally recognized structure. However, the provisions of the Arunachal Pradesh (Land Settlement and Records) Act, 2000 are found to be more relevant and effective in urban areas, where formal mechanisms of land documentation and legal regulation are more actively implemented. In contrast, in rural areas of Arunachal Pradesh, the administration of inheritance rights continues to be largely governed by customary laws and is managed through traditional institutions such as the village council. In fact, the Act itself does not displace these customary practices; rather, it implicitly recognizes and validates them by allowing the continued application of indigenous norms in matters relating to land, thereby reinforcing the coexistence of formal legal provisions and customary systems.

regulation. The institution of Hwijv shows that inheritance extends beyond legal entitlement to include social responsibility, filial duty, and cultural values. Although gender disparities—especially in immovable property persist, women's limited rights over movable assets reflect a conditional inclusion within the system. Traditional institutions like the Keba remain vital in maintaining social order and resolving disputes, even as formal legal frameworks, particularly in urban Arunachal Pradesh, bring gradual changes. Parents may transfer self-acquired property, including immovable assets, to daughters, but cannot freely transfer ancestral property due to lack of absolute ownership. Thus, customary laws continue to coexist with modern legal systems, ensuring both continuity and adaptive change.

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CONCLUSION

The inheritance system of the Galo Tribe is rooted in customary law, marked by patrilineal norms, moral obligations, and community