

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Chicken-Liver Divination (Roksin-Kognam): An Ethnographic Study among the Galo Tribe

Dr. Kiryi Potom

Assistant Professor, Rang-Frah Govt College, Changlang, India.

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Corresponding Author: Dr. Kiryi Potom, Assistant Professor, Rang-Frah Govt College, Changlang, India.

Abstract

Divination through chicken-liver, locally known as Roksin-Kognam, is an important indigenous practice among some of the Tani groups of Arunachal Pradesh, especially the Galo tribe. Based on oral traditions and linked to the ancestral figure Abo Tani, this practice has developed into a structured system of knowledge used for diagnosis, prediction, and decision-making in social, agricultural, ritual, and everyday contexts.

This study uses an ethnographic approach to document and analyse the process, meanings, and socio-cultural role of Roksin-Kognam, with special attention to Roksin-Kogek, the preliminary stage. Fieldwork was carried out in selected areas of Arunachal Pradesh using interviews, observation, and purposive sampling methods.

The findings show that the chicken liver is understood as a medium through which humans communicate with the supernatural world. The ritual is performed by specialists such as Xibu (shamans) and Xibv (ritual orators), and it follows three main stages: Roksin-Kogek (preliminary), Roksin-Kogja (main), and Roksin-Kogyww (final). Each stage has a specific role in identifying, explaining, and confirming the issue under examination.

Although similar practices existed in ancient hepatoscopy traditions, Roksin-Kognam remains distinct because of its oral transmission and local symbolic meanings. The study shows its cultural importance and highlights the need to preserve this practice in a time of rapid social and cultural change.

Keywords: Roksin-Kognam, Chicken-Liver Divination, Galo Tribe, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Ethnography, Hepatoscopy, Roksin-Kogja, Roksin-Kogyww.

1. Introduction

Divination has been part of human life since early times. People have used it to understand uncertainty, predict future events, and connect with unseen or supernatural forces. One common form of divination is the study of animal organs, especially the liver. This practice, known as hepatoscopy or extispicy, was found in many ancient civilizations such as Mesopotamia, Anatolia, Greece, and Rome, where it played an important role in decision-making related to war, politics, and religion.

In the Indian subcontinent, divination is closely linked with indigenous belief systems, particularly among tribal communities. One such practice is Roksin-

Kognam, or chicken-liver divination, which is found among the Tani groups of Arunachal Pradesh. These groups include the Adi, Apatani, Galo, Nyishi, Tagin, and Mishing communities. While the practice exists among several of these groups, there are differences in how the ritual is performed and interpreted.

Among the Galo tribe, Roksin-Kognam is more than a simple ritual. It is a well-developed system of knowledge and belief. In earlier times, it was mainly used to identify the causes of illness or misfortune, but over time its use has expanded. Today, it is also used to predict future events, settle disputes, make decisions about marriage, and even identify cases of suspected theft.

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This ritual is not performed by ordinary individuals. It is carried out by trained or gifted specialists such as Xibu (shamans), Xibv (ritual orators), and Roksin-Konv/Kanv (liver interpreters). These specialists are believed to possess special knowledge and the ability to correctly interpret the signs seen on the chicken liver.

The practice follows a structured process with three main stages: Roksin-Kogek (preliminary stage), Roksin-Kogja (main stage), and Roksin-Kogyww (final stage). The first stage helps to identify the general nature of the problem. The second stage provides a more detailed explanation, and the final stage confirms the findings. This step-by-step process shows that the ritual is systematic and organised.

Despite its cultural importance, Roksin-Kognam has received limited attention in academic research, especially in ethnographic and geographical studies. Most studies on divination focus on ancient civilizations or general theories, often overlooking local practices like those found among the Galo tribe. Therefore, this study aims to provide a detailed ethnographic account of Roksin-Kognam, focusing on its process, meanings, and role in society.

1.1 Significance of the Study

This study is important because it documents an indigenous divination practice that has received very little academic attention, especially in Northeast India. It helps preserve valuable cultural knowledge that is mainly passed down through oral traditions. The study also highlights how indigenous knowledge systems play an important role in decision-making in everyday life. In addition, it contributes to ethnographic research by providing detailed field-based insights into ritual practices and belief systems.

1.2 Objectives

- To document the present-day practice of Roksin-Kognam among the Galo tribe
- To examine its three main stages: Roksin-Kogek, Roksin-Kogja, and Roksin-Kogyw
- To understand the symbolic meanings and interpretations associated with the ritual
- To analyse its socio-cultural role and the impact of modern changes on the practice

1.3 Study Area

The Galo tribe is one of the major indigenous communities of Arunachal Pradesh. They mainly live in the districts of West Siang, Leparada, and Lower

Siang. Smaller populations are also found in East Siang, Upper Subansiri, Namsai, Lohit, Changlang, Lower Dibang Valley, and East Kameng. The Galo people belong to the larger Tani group, which shares similar cultural and ritual traditions across central Arunachal Pradesh.

For this study, selected Galo-inhabited areas such as Darak, Tirbin, Liromoba, Aalo, and Kamba were chosen. These areas were selected because they are accessible and allowed easier communication during fieldwork. The region is mostly hilly, with scattered rural settlements. Traditional institutions and ritual specialists still play an important role in the daily life of the people.

2. Methodology

This study is based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out in selected Galo-inhabited areas of Arunachal Pradesh, especially in West Siang and Leparada districts. A qualitative research approach was used to understand the practice of Roksin-Kognam within its cultural setting.

Primary data were collected through field observation, participation in rituals where possible, and interviews with ritual specialists such as Xibu (shamans), Xibv (ritual orators), and Roksin-Konv/Kanv (liver interpreters). Elderly community members and other knowledge holders were also consulted. These interactions helped in understanding both the ritual process and the meanings attached to it.

In some cases, ritual events, including chanting and liver examination, were arranged for detailed observation and documentation.

Secondary data were collected from books, research articles, ethnographic records, and government reports to support and compare the field findings. Tools such as interview schedules, audio recordings, and photographs were used to ensure accuracy and proper documentation.

2.1 Historical Background of Chicken-Liver Divination

According to the oral traditions of the Tani groups, there were three ancestral brothers: Riki (Taki), the ancestor of spirits; Rini (Abo Tani), the ancestor of humans; and Rinyo (Tanyo/Sonyo), the ancestor of animals. Among them, Taki and Tani were believed to have strong spiritual powers, while Tanyo had less.

Taki and Tani were often in conflict, as both tried to become more powerful. In many instances, Tani

defeated Taki and gained strength. However, a major turning point came when Taki captured the “Soul of Fire,” which was essential for Tani’s survival, as he depended on cooked food. Without it, Tani became weak.

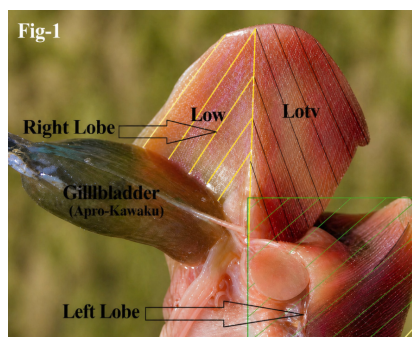
At first, Tani tried to recover it by offering material things, but Taki refused. In the end, Tani agreed to return the spiritual powers he had taken from Taki in exchange for the Soul of Fire. After this, Tani lost the ability to directly communicate with the spirit world.

As a result, he began to search for other ways to connect with supernatural forces. He experimented with different natural elements such as leaves, stones, insects, and the livers of animals and birds. Among these, the chicken liver was found to be the most effective medium.

According to local belief, the chicken was originally given by the Sun deity (Doxi) for ritual purposes. Over time, this practice developed into an important part of social and cultural life. It came to be used in matters such as illness, marriage, agriculture, disputes, and prediction of future events.

This practice is carried out only by trained ritual specialists such as Xibu (shamans), Xibv (ritual orators), and Roksin-Konv/Kanv (liver interpreters), who are believed to possess special knowledge and skills.

Although similar forms of liver divination existed in ancient civilizations, Roksin-Kognam has survived among the Tani groups. Its continued practice shows the strength of indigenous knowledge systems and their role in maintaining cultural identity.



3. Findings and Discussion

The ethnographic findings show that the interpretation of the chicken liver differs among the Tani sub-groups. For example, the Galo tribe mainly observes markings on the right lobe of the liver, while some other groups, such as the Nyishi, focus on the left lobe (shown in fig-1). This difference shows that even within a shared belief system, local variations in ritual practice exist.

Roksin-Kognam follows a structured process that combines chanting and interpretation. The ritual is performed only by trained or gifted specialists. During the ritual, the Xibu (shaman) invokes supernatural forces to reveal the hidden causes of a problem. After chanting, the chicken is sacrificed, and the liver is carefully examined. The Roksin-Konv/Kanv (interpreter) studies the lines, shapes, holes, and colours on the liver, and each sign is given a specific meaning.

The chanting process is highly complex and cannot be performed by ordinary individuals. It can only be performed by the gifted members in the community who have deep ritual knowledge and most of the Xibu (Shaman) is inherited from their forefather. The chanting usually starts with the story of Abo Tani’s early marriages with different elements of nature, such as leaves, animals, and fire, and continues up

to his marriage with Doxi Yai or Doxi-Mumsi, who is believed to be the mother of the Tani descendants. Through this narration, the ritual specialist gradually shifts from mythological context to the specific issue under examination.

The study also shows that the ritual is not only symbolic but also functional. It helps people understand illness, resolve conflicts, and make decisions in uncertain situations.

3.1 Types of Roksin-Kognam

Roksin-Kognam is performed in different stages, and each stage has a specific role in identifying and resolving a problem. The three main stages are:

1. Roksin-Kogek (Preliminary Stage)
2. Roksin-Kogja (Main Stage)
3. Roksin-Kogyw (Final Stage)

3.1.1 Roksin-Kogek (Preliminary Stage)

This is the first stage of the ritual. It helps to identify the general nature of the problem. At this stage, the liver is examined to detect broad indications, such as the presence of particular spiritual forces or conditions. It acts as a diagnostic phase.

Main Types of Roksin-Kogek:

- Illness diagnosis

- Marriage-related decisions
- Land dispute cases
- Theft identification
- Agricultural purposes
- General prediction

I. Illness Diagnosis (Ramv-Kogek)

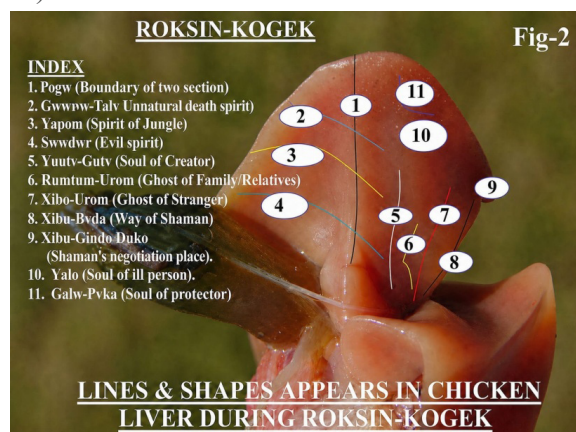
This is one of the most detailed forms of the ritual. It is used to identify the cause of illness. In the local belief system, illness is often linked to the influence of different spirits (Uyu). The markings on the liver help identify which spirit may be responsible and different shapes and lines are shown in fig-2. The shapes and lines seen on the chicken liver are believed to show which spirits are responsible for the person's illness. These signs are explained below as per fig-2.

Different indications are as follows:

- Index No-1: Pogw (boundary of two sections of the liver)
- Index No-2: Gwrw-Tale (spirit of unnatural death)
- Index No-3: Yapom (spirit of the forest)
- Index No-4: Swdwr (evil spirit)

- Index No-5: Yutv-Gutv (creative or supreme soul principle), Its appearance is interpreted as a sign that the creator entity seeks a form of reciprocation or offering from the afflicted individual in order to restore health, reflecting a relational understanding of illness within indigenous belief systems.
- Index No-6: Rumtum-Urom (family spirit)
- Index No-7: Xibo-Urom (Spirit of stranger)
- Index No-8: Xibu-Bvda (way of shaman)
- Index No-9: Xibu Gindo duko (Shaman's negotiation place)
- Index No-10: Yalo (soul of ill person)
- Index No-11: Galw-pvka (protective or guardian spirit), When this marking appears after ritual chanting, it is interpreted as an indication that the illness may arise from the displeasure or withdrawal of the individual's protective force, suggesting a need for ritual appeasement.

Once a specific indication appears, the process moves to the next stage for detailed examination. In some cases, multiple rituals are performed until a clear result is obtained. After this, necessary rituals and sacrifices are carried out to restore health.



II. Marriage (Xijwr-Kogek)

This ritual is performed to check the compatibility between a boy and a girl before marriage and the feeling of girls towards boy is also seen. It is also believed that the couple is also indicates here weather their future will positive or negative. In most of the cases, such ritual performs is done from boy side.

III. Land Disputes (Rwgrw-Kogek)

In earlier times, when written records were not available, this ritual was used to settle disputes related to land and boundaries when two or more parties disputes arisen. Still such practices are happening in Galo community.

IV. Theft Cases (Dosso-Kogek)

This form of divination is used to identify or give clues about theft. However, the results are not always considered fully reliable.

V. Agricultural Purposes (Rwggw-Kogek)

This ritual is performed before selecting land for cultivation, especially in shifting (jhum) agriculture. It is believed that certain forest areas are controlled by spiritual forces Pomtv-Jetv), and permission is needed before use.

VI. Prediction Purposes

Roksin-Kognam is also used to understand whether

something will succeed or fail in different activities like hunting, exams, marriage, business, politics, or even during times of conflict such as civil war. It helps people make important decisions in their lives. In recent times, the Galo community has also using this practice during elections, including both Vidhan Sabha and Lok Sabha elections. In earlier days all the decisions were taken based on this ritual practice.

3.1.2 Roksin-Kogja (Main Stage)

This is the main stage of the ritual. It is performed after the preliminary stage identifies the issue. At this stage, the Xibu (shaman) focuses on the specific problem and performs detailed rituals to address it.

The shaman acts as a mediator between humans and the supernatural world. Depending on the findings, rituals, offerings, or sacrifices are performed. In some cases, the process may continue for several days until a clear outcome is reached.

3.1.3 Roksin-Kogyw (Final Stage)

This is the final stage of the ritual. It is performed to confirm whether the earlier findings and actions were correct and successful. It helps ensure that no mistake was made during the process and provides closure to the ritual.

4. Conclusion

This study shows that Roksin-Kognam is an important form of indigenous knowledge among the Galo tribe. It is not just a ritual practice, but a meaningful system used to understand illness, uncertainty, and social issues. The three stages i.e. Roksin-Kogek, Roksin-Kogja, and Roksin-Kogyw, show a clear and systematic process, moving from initial identification to detailed interpretation and final confirmation.

The interpretation of the chicken liver is based on a shared system of signs that is understood by gifted specialists. These specialists, such as Xibu and Xibv, play an important role not only in ritual life but also in the wider community, as they act as mediators between the human and supernatural worlds.

At the same time, the study observes that this practice is gradually declining. Factors such as modern education, religious change, migration, and the growing use of biomedical healthcare are affecting its continuity. Another concern is the decreasing number of gifted ritual specialists and the lack of younger individuals willing to learn the tradition. Since this knowledge is mainly passed down through generations, its future depends on proper documentation and preservation. Therefore, a detailed study of Roksin-Kognam is

unable to cover in simple research paper because of its depth and vast scope. To understand it properly, it requires a much more extensive study, such as at the Ph.D level.

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