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## Proverbs as Cultural Symbols: An Analysis of Galo Proverbial Symbols

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### **Abstract:**

*All aspects of human behavior do tell something. Folklore, a kind of human behavior, too, tells many things. Alan Dundes' opinion that the folklore elements "provide serious reflections of our culture" corroborates this. The elements of folklore include several genres, of which, the proverbs are a very popular genre. They are prevalent in all human societies across the globe. Functionally, the proverbs serve legal, ethical, and moral purposes in the society. Besides these, the proverbs also seem to reflect the cultural ethos of a society. But this function of the proverbs is not a very obvious one; rather this reflection is subtle and hidden. Proverbs work symbolically and in their symbols, the cultural essence is disguised. Careful examination of the symbols used in the proverbs reveal that proverbs are indeed the cultural symbols. Dwelling upon some three proverbs of the Galo tribe of Arunachal Pradesh in India, the paper seeks to establish this supposition.*

**Keywords:** Folklore, culture, proverbs, symbols, tribe

### **1. Introduction**

"Symbolization is a universal human process," says Raymond Firth in his book *Symbols Public and Private*. The essence of symbolism lies in the recognition of one thing as standing for another, the relation between them normally being that of concrete to abstract, particular to general. In *Sartor Resartus* Carlyle opines, "In a symbol there is both concealment and yet revelation: hence therefore, by silence and by speech acting together, comes a double significance." Without symbolism, even language is incomplete. They give a concrete structure to language. Besides, the use of symbols in language is also a potent way of exerting extra effect to oral communication. The defamiliarization concept developed by Viktor Shklovsky, the Russian Formalist, corroborates that symbolization helps in defamiliarizing ordinary language and in making it beautiful, attractive and forceful.

As proverbs are a special way of linguistic expression, use of symbols in proverbs are abundant. The proverbs make use of symbols of different aspects and thus become a rich linguistic expression. As such, the Galo tribe of Arunachal Pradesh is no exception. Since time immemorial, the use of proverbs has been there in Galo Language and their use in daily communication has not only given weight to the expression, but has also helped in defamiliarizing the ordinary language and made it more expressive and vigorous. The extensive presence of symbols in Galo proverbs act as an agent in defamiliarizing the expression and segregate proverbs from ordinary language and make them a special linguistic expression. Apart from defamiliarization and beautification, the use of symbolism in Galo proverbs is also instrumental in reflecting the Galo culture. It serves both as the window for the Galo to look at the world and for the world to look at the Galo; for, in the symbolic expression of proverbs is hidden the vast storehouse of the Galo worldview. Alan Dundes' opinion that the folklore elements "provide serious reflections of our culture" is quite apt in this regard. Proverbs, being a part of folklore, then also must give a reflection of that culture to which they belong. Therefore, a proper analysis of symbolic expressions in Galo proverbs can build up the structure of Galo culture. It is this cultural signification that the present paper looks to. By scrutinizing three popular proverbs, the paper tries to establish the cultural identity of the Galo.

In order to establish that proverbial sayings unconsciously signify cultural symbols, the classification of proverbs has been kept aside as the focus of the paper does not need any classification. Instead, the symbolic analysis of three proverbs is placed to prove the point. The analysis is done on the basis that the Galo proverbs in their very act of symbolic conveyance, become instruments of defamiliarizing the language. And to be defamiliarized, the proverbs use symbols that are culture-specific and are typical of Galo tribe. The symbols in question may have different uses in different cultural contexts, but the signification referred here is in Galo context. The symbols in these proverbs signify aspects that are specific to the Galo worldview.

### **2. Proverbs as Cultural Symbols**

The analysis of the given three proverbs display two levels of meanings – the denotative or the manifest meaning at the first level, and the connotative or the latent meaning, at the second level. At the denotative level, a proverb carries only its literal meaning. But at the connotative level, it transcends its formal feature of being just words and refers to a meaning that is distant but expressive. It is

expressive because it speaks of some other features that carry greater relevance, greater effect, and greater importance. In asserting these greater values, the proverb use symbols that convey greater relevance. When these symbols are brought to scrutiny, the Galo worldview is amply magnified and the proverbial symbols become objects of Galo cultural identity. As instances, the analysis of the following three Galo proverbs is placed.

1. *Abo gə menjik duki əm nyiku gulu lo rokkop la,*  
*Ato gə menkok paasak əm nyitə kaalo lo lədu la.*

#### 2.1. Translation

Laws of our ancestors are there in the wise man's hearth,  
Saws of our forefathers are there upon the rich man's hearth.

#### 2.2. Discussion

Here, the words *abo* (father) and *ato* (usually father-in-law, but here connotative of ancestors); shed their literal meaning and stand for the forefathers. The words *menjik* and *menkok* mean true and wise words; and *duki* means a bamboo tube, used as container, in which important things were kept but are out of use now. *Paasak* is a rucksack, made of cane for carrying articles. *Nyiku* is an old and experienced man and *nyitə* is literally a rich man, but here it implies the importance such persons give to their belongings. *Gulu* is the rectangular wooden planks that frame the earthen hearth in a Galo house. It is the place where all important household works are done and the family decision is taken. Life revolves round it and it is the seat of administration also. *Kaalo* is a rectangular frame of wood that is hung above the hearth to contain things. *Rokkop la* means to engrave and *lədu la* means to keep something upon the *kaalo*.

In this proverb itself, the presence of several symbols are seen. By the use of images like *gulu*, *kaalo*, *duki*, *paasak* and others, this proverb symbolises the authority exerted by the ancient traditions and customs that are epitomised by sayings and proverbs. As the hearth of a family is the symbol of authority for the family, the sayings and proverbs inside the frame of the hearth and upon the hearth, symbolise the power and authority of the Galo traditions and customs that still are the bedrock of Galo world.

Wisdom apart, the chosen symbols in the proverb is Galo specific. *Gulu*, *kaalo*, *duki* and *paasak* are articles invented by the Galo people out of natural materials in their own way. Moreover, the construction of *gulu* around the hearth and *kaalo* above the hearth is a convention seen within Galo culture only. In the given perspective, their symbolic use in the proverb paves the way to identify and traverse not only the Galo customary path but the world of Galo handicrafts and artefacts. The *duki*, the *gulu*, the *paasak* and the *kaalo* are objects that are identifiable as Galo handicrafts. That way, a glimpse of Galo cultural world is seen through the identification of symbols in this proverb.

2. *Lətəm pəden la.*

*Boktəm pəden la.*

#### 2.3. Translation

The site of *lətəm* is changeable,  
The point of *boktəm* is changeable.

#### 2.4. Discussion

In the Galo practice, fishing is done by a unique method called *hibok pənam*. In it, the site of a diverging river course is located and at that site, one of the diverging courses is blocked both at the tip and at the end, where the diverging courses meet again and form the same river. Due to blockage at the tip, the blocked course becomes very shallow. The shallow course is then diluted with the grinded particles of some toxic plants that kill the fishes. Then the fishes are collected easily. In such practice, the tip of the divergent course is called *boktəm* and the end is called the *lətəm*. As the course of the river always changes, the *lətəm* or the *boktəm* is changed (*pəden la*) as per the prevailing course of the river.

In the proverb, the images of *lətəm* and *boktəm* are used to signify flexibility in coming to terms with something, especially, marriage regulations and disputes. The proverb thus symbolises that situations of such events should be taken as per the prevalent circumstances. One should not be a termagant in such matters. There must be a situational approach to all dealings. Besides, the symbols *lətəm* and *boktəm* speak of the Galo way of life. For sustenance, people exploit resources in their own style. *Hibok pənam* too, is a way of fishing stylized by Galo people since centuries ago. From this specific style of fishing, an onlooker easily identifies the Galo cultural practice. The symbols of *lətəm* and *boktəm* in this proverb thus become tools to understand a specific Galo cultural practice.

3. *Potə lokə nyigla gai nago,*

*Dintə lokə tapo gai nago.*

#### 2.5. Translation

A teardrop of drink from a big brew,  
A *tapo*-like share from a big piece.

### 2.6. Discussion

Traditionally, in Galo society, during community feasts and festivals, people are distributed pieces of meats and rice beer. They dine and drink and make merriment. At such a time, it is the moral duty of all to cooperate and participate. None is expected to make demands and claims at such times. To maintain this spirit of community feeling, the proverb is often quoted in terms of *poka* (rice beer) and *adin* (meat) as they are the main source of feasting. Here, the word *potā* means a brew in large scale that is meant for large gathering and *dintā* means a big piece of meat. These words are the derivational use of the words *poka* and *adin*.

Within the words *potā* and *dintā*, the symbols of teardrop (*nyigla gai nago*) and a small share (*tapo gai nago*, where *tapo* is *Danio rerio*, a kind of a small fish to indicate smallness) are fitted into the proverb to convey the value of sharing and living in harmony without any big claims. Little sharing in the social activities smoothen the process of social progress and keeps up the communal harmony. In an elaborate way, the proverb can be seen as a symbol of Galo's political approach to life. Within a society; codified or non-codified, natural or imposed, a political system is always set to govern people's way of life. Though not strictly codified, the symbolic message conveyed through *nyigla* and *tapo* within *potā* and *dintā* obviously signify the greater political life of the Galo people. Through the scrutiny of these symbols, the political way of life of the Galo people is obviously seen and understood at once.

Although these two symbols alone do not hold any authority to declare the whole political set up of Galo society; nevertheless, they certainly hint the overall political frame of which the codified Galo society is a part.

### 3. Conclusion

From the discussions of these proverbs, there is vast scope to build up the deduction that the symbolic expression of the Galo proverbs not only defamiliarizes the familiar words, it also denote particular pattern of thought, action, practice or behaviour that is typical of Galo culture. Symbolic identification of the Galo proverbs thus enables the understanding of the Galo worldview and their cultural diversity. As in the first specimen proverb, the symbols of *duki*, *gulu*, *paasak* and *kaalo* are used as agents to defamiliarize the language of the proverb first. Then on further search, it is realized that they are symbols that also signify Galo culture at large. Obviously, the total cultural identity of a tribe can never be established merely on the basis of just three proverbs but certainly, the present three proverbs open the gateway to enter the entire culture-symbol relationship of the Galo tribe. Like these three proverbs, the various other symbols used in various Galo proverbs point to one aspect or another of the bigger Galo cultural canvas and aid in comprehending the Galo cultural pluralism.

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