



PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF SHAMANISM AMONG THE GALO AND IDU MISHMI TRIBE OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH: DIVINE SELECTION AND SPIRITUAL RESPONSIBILITY

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Abstract: This paper presents a comparative ethnographic and philosophical analysis of shamanic traditions within the Galo and Idu Mishmi tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, India this research investigates how divine vocation, ritual discipline, and moral obligation fundamentally structure indigenous spiritual life of Galo Nyibu and Idu Mishmi Igu. The study interprets shamanism as a complex phenomenon functioning simultaneously as a religious vocation and an applied moral philosophy rooted in maintaining equilibrium across the human, natural, and spiritual realms. Findings indicate that shamanic initiation is universally perceived not as a voluntary career path but as a divine, often involuntary, calling, frequently evidenced by periods of debilitating illness, prophetic dreams, or intense visionary experiences. The comparative analysis demonstrates that while both traditions share a core cosmology emphasizing reciprocity, healing, and ethical responsibility, they diverge significantly in their mythological genealogies and ritual symbolic frameworks.

Keywords: Shamanism; Galo tribe; Idu Mishmi; Divine vocation; Indigenous philosophy

Received : 03 November 2025

Revised : 06 December 2025

Accepted : 11 December 2025

Published : 27 December 2025

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Chibom Jilen, Bikash Mepo & Radhe Amung (2025). Philosophical Foundations of Shamanism among the Galo and Idu Mishmi Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh: Divine Selection and Spiritual Responsibility, *Journal of South Asian Research*, 3: 2, pp. 343-366.

Introduction

The Galo tribe is dispersed across nearly every region of Arunachal Pradesh but traditionally resides in five districts: Upper Subansiri, Leparada, West Siang, Lower Siang, and East Siang. The Galo tribe is part of the Tani group, which includes the Adi, Apatani, Nyishi, and Tagin tribes. The Tani tribes share a common ancestry, tracing their lineage to the legendary figure Abo Tani, who is considered the “father of humankind”. This shared ancestry is reflected in the myths and folklore of the Galo community.

The Galo tribe, once grouped under the broader term “Adi,” has since sought to distinguish itself, particularly after the term “Abor” (meaning someone who does not submit) fell out of favor. The Galo tribe was officially recognized as a Scheduled Tribe in 1950, with the correct spelling of “Galo” being formally adopted in 2012 to replace the distorted version “Gallong” or “Galong”. Ethnically, the Galo people belong to the Mongoloid racial category, and their language is part of the Tibeto-Burman linguistic group.

Like many communities in the region, the Galo adhere to an animistic form of religion. Central to their spiritual life is the Nyibu, or shaman, who serves as a mediator uniting spirituality and community welfare. The Galo believe in a supreme spiritual entity named Doori-Siji, who is the primordial creator and the origin source for all Nyibus. This divine ordination reflects the belief that these shamans are chosen to safeguard humankind and maintain the critical harmony between the human (Tani) and spiritual (Ui) realms. Galo Nyibus are categorized based on their spiritual blessings and abilities. For instance, Gumin Nyibus receive powers from benevolent spirits to perform healing and welfare rituals, whereas Tago Nyibus derive power from malevolent spirits and are known for divination and trance rituals.

The Idu Mishmi is a sub-tribe of the larger Mishmi group (Idu, Taron and Kaman) of Arunachal Pradesh. It is primarily located in the Lower Dibang Valley and Dibang valley district of Arunachal Pradesh (A.P.). The populations are also sparsely located in Lohit, East Siang (Aohali) and Upper Siang (Shemo) district of (A.P.). The Idu-Mishmi was referred to as “Chulikata” Mishmi for their distinct hairstyle. This nomenclature was given by people who lived in the plains.

Idu Mishmi is Mongoloid and speaks Tibeto-Burman languages. Mithu, Midu and Mindri are the three prominent dialects of the Idu language. The Idu society is based on consanguinal and affinal kinship, according equal importance to levirate and sororate. Polygamy is also accepted among the Idus.

The Idu Mishmi practice animism and believe in a variety of spirits known as Khinu.

The Idu community also follows an animistic religion, centered on the shaman known as the Igu. Their worldview regarding the spirits (Khinu) is distinct; the Idus do not establish emotional connections with these supernatural beings but instead view them as dynamic entities that can be both benevolent and malevolent. Consequently, their religious practice is not based on prayer or prostration. Instead, the Idus focus on following specific restrictions and regulations to avoid the wrath of these spirits. The core driving force in their belief system is the Dorows, or tutelary spirits, which are considered immortal. The power of an Igu is derived directly from these Dorows. The daily life of the Idu Mishmi is governed by strict taboos, known as Angi, which regulate everything from agriculture and hunting to birth and death rituals, ensuring the well-being and decorum of the community.

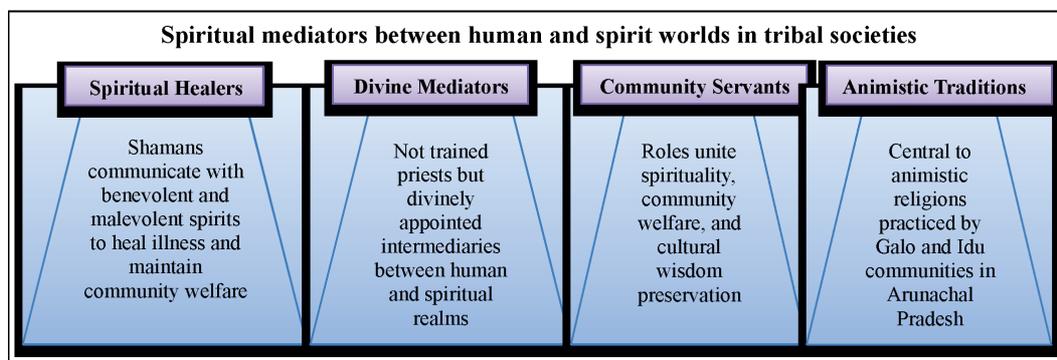
Shamanism among Galo and Idu Mishmi Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh

A shaman is a person in certain religious and societal contexts believed to communicate with both benevolent and malevolent spirits and heal people from illness (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, cited in Chaudhuri, 2019). In Arunachal Pradesh, except for those practicing Buddhism, many communities follow animistic religions. Both the Galo and Idu communities adhere to animistic forms of religion. The institution of shamanism among these tribes is a primary source of myths, rituals, and various social structures (Dele, 2021). The roles of the Nyibu (shaman) among the Galo and the Igu (shaman) among the Idu shows how spiritual vocation, moral discipline, and social responsibility intertwine in everyday life.

The Nyibu and Igu are not professional priests who can be trained but divinely appointed mediators whose roles unite spirituality, community welfare, and the preservation of cultural wisdom. This position is described as a responsibility bestowed by the creator rather than a self-chosen occupation. However, modern influences from other religions, leading to conversions to Hinduism and Christianity, have caused many people in Arunachal Pradesh to abandon shamanistic practices. Previously, young people were exposed to and participated in various shamanistic rituals, but the current generation no longer observes these traditions. Efforts have been made to preserve shamanism, by

the Idu Mishmi Cultural and Literary Society (IMCLS), which launched the Idu Mishmi Shaman Fellowship Programme to support young aspiring shamans under the guidance of experienced Iigus. An Igu becomes qualified through association with experienced Iigus and initiation by spirits, gaining sufficient knowledge and proving capable of handling powerful spirits (Baruah, 1988). Iigus must also endure an ordeal, sometimes described as “divine madness,” during which they exhibit extraordinary, non-human feats and behaviors (Dele, 2018).

A Nyibu may lead an ordinary life, engaging in farming or government service, but his ritual authority and ethical conduct make him indispensable to the traditional Galo social order (Fieldwork, 2024; Chapter 2). Similarly, Iigus lead normal lives but must adhere to strict taboos. For instance, an Igu performing a death ritual must observe a period of 5 to 10 days without conducting other rituals, strictly adhering to taboos and refraining from normal duties (Baruah, 1988). Different rituals, from birth to death, involve specific taboos for both shamans and community members. Before performing any ritual, an Igu conducts the Alo-we Ajiru mu, invoking their tutelary spirit and offering a sacrifice to persuade the spirit to assist in their duties (Baruah, 1988).



In Galo belief, the supreme spiritual entity is Door-i-Siji, and all Nyibus trace their origin to Door-i-Siji, the primordial creator credited with appointing the first Human Nyibu. Similarly, Poor-i-Siji is regarded as the source of Spirit Nyibu. This divine ordination reflects the belief that certain individuals are chosen to safeguard humankind and maintain harmony between the human (Tani) and spiritual (Ui) realms. The selection is never voluntary but manifests through prolonged illness, dreams, visions, or trance-like states revealing the will of Door-i-Siji (Fieldwork, 2024; Chapter 2).

The Idus do not establish emotional connections with supernatural beings, viewing them as dynamic entities that can be both benevolent and malevolent (Dele, 2019). There is no prevailing concept of praying or prostrating before superior beings (Dele, 2018). Instead, the Idus follow specific restrictions and regulations to avoid the wrath of these beings. They believe in tutelary spirits called Dorows, which are the core driving force in their belief system and are considered immortal. The power of an Igu derives from these Dorows, and upon a shaman's death, this power can transfer to a close kin member or another Igu. Different rituals, guided by various supernatural shamans, are performed, particularly for death rituals. For example, the death ritual was first conducted by the semi-divine almighty shaman Sineru for his mother, and different almighty shamans conduct other rituals (Dele, 2018).

Ethnographic evidence collected during the 2024 fieldwork in Ese Kerte, Dumporijo, Liromoba, and Chota Rupuk confirms that the Nyibu serves as a healer, protector, and mediator between humans and spiritual forces. The Nyibu performs rituals of divination and healing such as Pwpu Sinam (examination using an egg), Rogjin Kanam (divine examination of a chicken liver), and Regjin Kanam, which is conducted when a pig has been sacrificed in the ritual to examine its liver and assess the success of the ceremony. These practices are used to identify the source of misfortune and determine the appropriate ritual remedy. (Fieldwork, 2024; Chapter 2). These observations highlight the Nyibu's dual role as a social servant and spiritual technician whose knowledge sustains individual and collective well-being.

The shamans can be classified in to the following types among Idus and Galos:

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| <p>Gumin Nyibus (Galo) Blessed by benevolent creator spirits. Perform healing, prosperity, and community welfare rituals. Also called <i>Nya Buda</i>.</p> | <p>Tago Nyibus (Galo) Receive powers from malevolent spirits. Known for divination and dangerous trance rituals like Nyigre. Also called Tago-Taram.</p> |
| <p>Buru Nyibu (Galo) Rare shamans with extraordinary powers from the mystical water spirit Buru. Combine abilities of both Gumin and Tago Nyibus.</p> | <p>Igu Meme (Idu) Powerful, experienced shamans who perform death rituals (Ya), Reh, and Amrasey. Require full ceremonial costumes.</p> |
| <p>Igu-A (Idu) Junior shamans acting as medicine men. Perform rituals like Ayi (fever cure), Atare (infant well-being), and Alluthru (cleansing after deaths).</p> | |

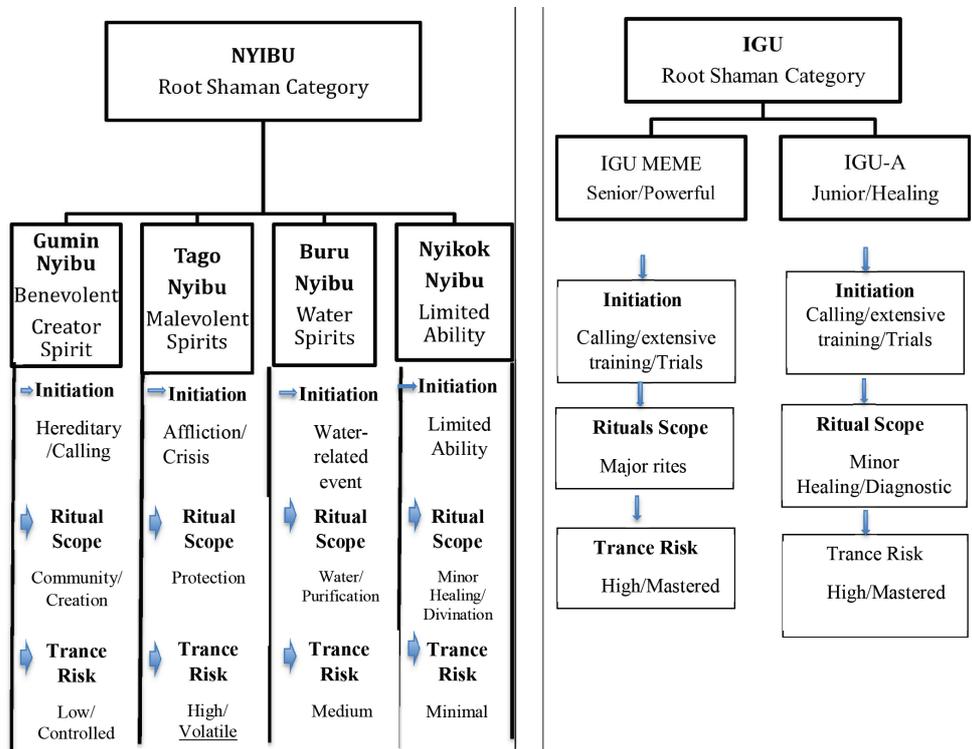
Nyibus, are classified into different types based on the nature of the spirits that bless them and the extent of their ritual abilities. Gumin Nyibus, also known as Nya Buda, are endowed with powers from benevolent creator spirits and perform rituals for healing, prosperity, and community welfare. In contrast, Tago Nyibus, also called Tago-Taram, receive powers from malevolent spirits and are known for divination and performing dangerous trance rituals such as Nyigre, which can cause harm or remove misfortune. A rare category is the Buru Nyibu, who possess extraordinary powers derived from the mystical water spirit Buru and are believed to perform supernatural feats that combine the abilities of both Gumin and Tago Nyibus, as seen in the legendary figure Rigur. Additionally, there exists an intermediate category known as Nyikok, who, though not full-fledged Nyibus, possess limited spiritual abilities and specialize in divine examinations using animal organs and in performing smaller rituals. Collectively, these types reflect a spectrum of spiritual expertise that shapes the socio-religious part of Galo society.

Igus also serve as healers, mediating between the supernatural and terrestrial worlds. Idu believe that misfortunes are caused by either malevolent or benevolent spirits (Mepo, 2024). Malevolent spirits bring harm to the physical world if taboos and rituals are not properly observed. With the assistance of Dorows (guiding spirits), Igus diagnose the causes of problems (Dele, 2018). They use materials such as kanli-ta (rhizome roots), Athurambo (*Podophyllum hexandrum*), Ato (rooster), Eli (pig, used for major rituals like Amrasey, death rituals, and Re), Etuchu (egg, used to resolve conflicts or for healing those on their deathbed), Chick (used in disputes or for healing the dying), Machiwo (water), Iku (dog, used during epidemics), and Yu (rice beer).

Among the Idu, there are two types of shamans: Igu Meme, who are powerful and experienced and can perform death rituals (Ya, the journey of the soul), Reh, and Amrasey (a ritual for family well-being), requiring full ceremonial costumes; and Igu-A, junior shamans who act as medicine men, performing rituals such as Ayi (to cure fever caused by jungle spirits Apa-Asa), Atare (for the well-being of infants), and Alluthru (cleansing after attending deaths). An Igu-A can become an Igu through association with an Igu Meme or through spiritual initiation, proving their ability to handle powerful spirits (Chaudhuri, 2019). Shamans drive away malevolent supernatural beings and perform numerous rituals for people's well-being, engaging in intelligent discourse to reason, debate, reconcile, and converse with malevolent spirits to identify the cause of disturbances. Powerful shamans may even warn evil spirits, with sacrifice being the final step to seal the bond between aggressors and the aggrieved (Dele, 2018).

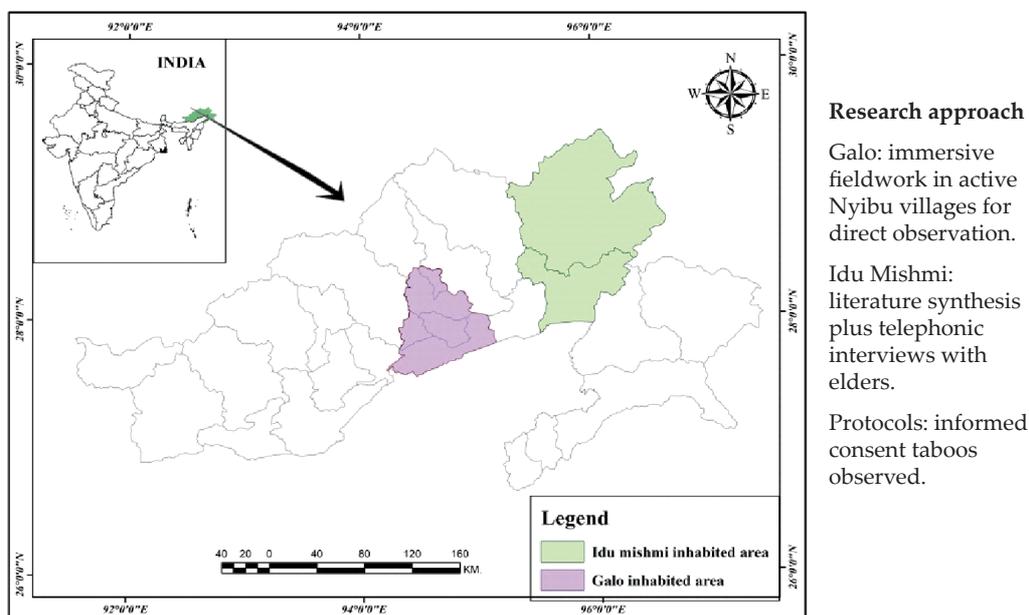
From a philosophical standpoint, the institutions of the Nyibu and Igu present a profound challenge to modern, secular ontologies. Their practices assert a worldview where reality is fundamentally relational, co-constituted by human and non-human agencies (spirits, Doorri-Siji, Dorows). This contrasts with Western Cartesian dualism, which separates mind from body and culture from nature. In this worldview, illness, morality, and ecology are inextricably linked within a single, animated cosmos. The shaman's role as a divinely chosen, rather than professionally trained, mediator critiques modern notions of individual agency and career, positing instead a model of vocation as "divine madness" or surrender to a larger cosmic order. The current erosion of these practices due to external religious influences represents not only a cultural loss but also the potential collapse of an entire philosophical system-one that sustains communal harmony through ritual negotiation with a dynamic and powerful spiritual world, rather than through supplication to a single, distant deity. The struggle to preserve shamanism is, therefore, a struggle to maintain a distinct way of being that offers an alternative to both theistic devotion and secular materialism.

Galo Nyibu and Idu Mishmi Igu



Methodology and Field Sites: Ethnography with Quantitative Extensions

A qualitative approach was followed, deemed essential for capturing the lived realities and philosophical underpinnings of shamanism. This approach combined three primary methods: participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and the collection of oral histories.



- **Participant Observation:** The researcher attended and documented numerous divine examinations and healing ceremonies. This included observing specific Galo divination practices such as Pwpuw Sinam (examination using an egg), Rogjin Kanam (divine examination of a chicken liver), and Regjin Kanam (examination of a pig's liver following a sacrifice). This method allowed for the detailed documentation of ritual procedures and the transcription of sacred chants.
- **Interviews and Oral Histories:** Semi-structured interviews were the primary method for gathering personal narratives. These interviews were held with practicing Nyibus, including prominent figures like Dagma Ropuk of Chota Rupuk, as well as with community elders and other members. The interactions were designed to explore the

core themes of the research, focusing on the signs of divine election (such as prolonged illness or visions), the demands of ritual discipline (including the strict observance of taboos), and the moral duties and ethical burdens inherent to the Nyibu’s role.

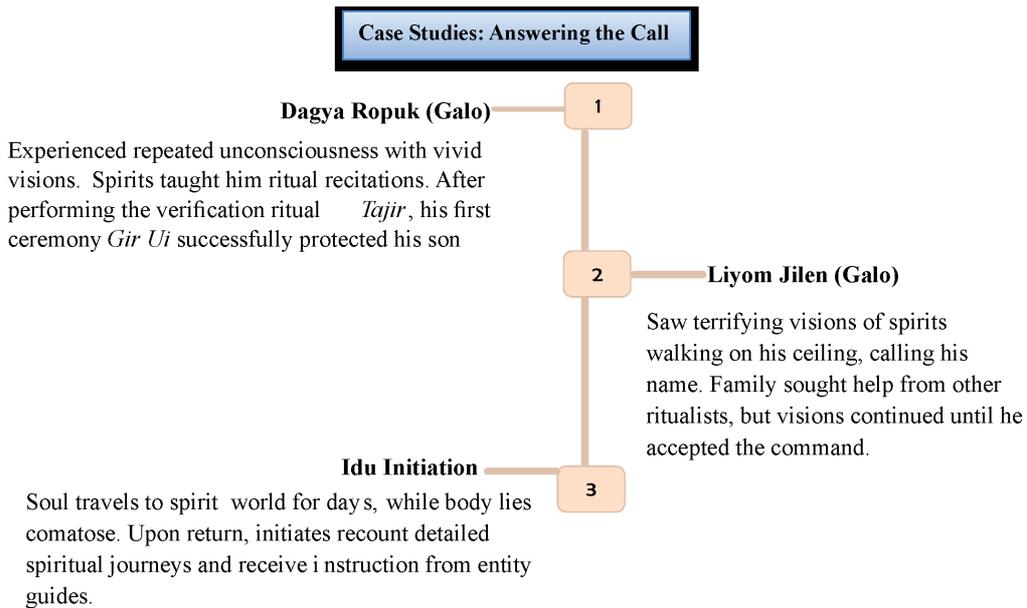
- **Supplementary Data:** To triangulate the oral data, supplementary data were drawn from locally published religious texts and notes obtained from Donyi-Polo temple committees. This textual data was particularly valuable for clarifying the specific cosmological terms central to Galo belief, such as Ui (the spiritual realm), Doorri-Siji (the primordial creator and source of Human Nyibu), and Poori-Siji (the source of Spirit Nyibu).

All field activities were conducted only after following strict community protocols, which included gaining prior consent from village elders and diligently observing all local taboos. A reflexive stance was maintained throughout the research. This involved consciously prioritizing indigenous explanations of spiritual experience—such as the reality of a “divine calling” or the agency of spirits—over external, secular interpretations. This emic-focused approach was vital for achieving the study aim of presenting a coherent indigenous philosophy of shamanism.

The Divine Calling: Becoming of Galo Nyibu and Idu-mishmi Igu

Accounts collected during fieldwork in Galos inhabitant area reveal several recurring signs through which spirits announce their choice. Across villages such as Ese Kerte, Dumporijo, Liromoba, and Chota Rupuk, elders described similar experiences among those destined to become Nyibus:

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|--|--|
| <p style="text-align: center;">Prolonged Illness</p> <p>Un explained sickness that medical treatment cannot cure - healing comes only after the calling</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">Prophetic Dreams</p> <p>Repeated visions of ancestral shamans, celestial beings, or ritual objects revealing Doorri-Siji's will.</p> |
| <p style="text-align: center;">Trance States</p> <p>Entering altered consciousness, chanting or performing rituals without prior training—proof of spirit possession.</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">Divine Madness</p> <p>Superhuman feats like lifting massive loads, eating stones or embers — demonstrations of spirit inhabitation</p> |



Among the Galos and Idus Shamanic power is received through revelation, not training. Refusing the call invites illness, misfortune, or spiritual imbalance. The individual does not choose shamanism—shamanism claims them. But not every individual is destined to become an Igu, or Nyibu. The path is one of calling, not choice, and specific omens are interpreted as signs of this profound destiny. Among Idus A child born with the umbilical cord coiled around its neck is one such powerful indicator, seen not as a medical complication but as a spiritual noose, a direct claim from the spirit world. Similarly, prophetic dreams experienced by the mother, perhaps of her child conversing with ancestral spirits or receiving sacred objects, are taken as divine foreshadowing of the role the child is meant to fulfill.

However, these signs alone are not a guarantee. They are merely the first whispers of a calling that must be validated through a period of profound personal transformation, often occurring in adolescence or young adulthood. Before formally assuming the role of an Igu, individuals frequently display a set of common and unsettling traits. They may become withdrawn, melancholic, or exhibit erratic behavior that is interpreted as a struggle between their human self and the demanding spirits. The shaman also experience spontaneous trance state, where the individual's soul is believed to travel to the spirit world. This is not a brief journey; the soul may reside there for what feels like days, weeks,

or even years, while their physical body lies comatose or wanders in a fugue. Upon return, they often recount detailed experiences of navigating spiritual landscapes and receiving instruction from entity guides.

Their physical behavior in the waking world also becomes marked by bizarre, superhuman, or taboo-breaking acts that signal spirit possession and a rejection of ordinary human limitations. They might display inexplicable and immense strength, such as effortlessly lifting huge baskets of paddy that would normally require multiple laborers. In other instances, they may engage in acts that defy basic human nature, like eating mud, stones, or burning embers, unharmed. These actions are not seen as madness, but as demonstrations of their body being inhabited and protected by powerful spirits, proving their eligibility for the sacred and demanding office of the Igu. This tumultuous phase culminates in formal training under an elder shaman, who helps the initiate harness these chaotic forces for the benefit of the community.

Philosophical Interpretation

The narratives show that Igu and Nyibuhood are inseparable from divine compulsion. The individual does not choose the role; the role chooses the individual. For example, a well-known shaman from Idu Mishmi, whose son wanted to become an Igu like his father but failed because the tutelary spirit, Dorows, did not select him (testimonial from one respondent of Idu Mishmi).

- Epistemologically, ritual knowledge is received through revelation rather than training. In the context of Igu and Nyibu shamanism. As Igu shamanism its practice declines, efforts have been made to institutionalize it. The “Igu Ahito” (learning Igu) program, run under the Idu Mishmi Cultural and Literary Society, encourages the younger generation to take up Idu shamanism. Naba Sipa Melo, a prominent Idu Mishmi shaman, proposed this initiative for two primary reasons: the decline of Igu, who are essential for the spiritual and physical well-being of the Idu community, and the role of shamans as repositories of Idus culture and ancestral knowledge, which can be preserved by protecting shamans. The program also challenges neo-animism, which dilutes the original faith by intermixing elements of different beliefs, distorting authentic shamanism. While experience and faith may have different realizations, efforts should be made to protect the belief

system without undermining modern methods, avoiding complexity and confusion.

- Metaphysically, spirits act as active agents bridging the human and divine spheres. Both Igu and Nyibu serve as intermediaries between the human and spiritual worlds.
- Ethically, neglecting or resisting the divine call invites illness, misfortune, or spiritual imbalance (Fieldwork 2024; Chapter 2). Among Igu, failure to perform rituals can lead to the loss of their ability to function as Igu.

Divine selection thus represents both empowerment and obligation. It grants sacred authority but imposes duties of restraint and service. For the Galo and Idu, this transforms an ordinary person into a moral being responsible for the welfare of others, that spiritual vocation is a divine command inseparable from ethical responsibility.

Ritual Discipline & Sacred Taboos

In the spiritual landscapes of the Galo and Idu peoples, the acceptance of divine election as a Nyibu or Igu is not merely the assumption of a role; it is the embracing of a profound, lifelong covenant. This path, marked by pre-ordained signs and a tumultuous period of transformation, culminates in a binding code of moral and ritual discipline. The central tenet in Galo thought is that spiritual power cannot exist in a vacuum—it is inextricably linked to responsibility. The legitimacy, efficacy, and very safety of a Nyibu depend upon a triad of virtues: purity of personal conduct, unwavering ritual precision, and selfless service to the community. Each chant uttered, each offering made, and each step in a ceremonial sequence must be performed with absolute accuracy and heartfelt sincerity. As documented in fieldwork (2024, Chapter 2), this is not a matter of preference but of necessity, for a single mistake can have dire consequences, angering the ancestral spirits (Uyus for the Galo) or causing tangible harm to the community, such as illness, crop failure, or unresolved spiritual unrest.

This concept of sacred responsibility is reflecting among the Idus. Once an individual, having navigated the trials of spiritual calling including soul journeys to the spirit world and displays of supernatural strength formally becomes an Igu, they are bound by a specific and rigorous set of ritual disciplines and taboos. Adherence is critical because the Igu operates as a conduit for powerful forces. An incorrectly performed ritual is not simply ineffective; it is

dangerous. It can cause a backlash that endangers not only the shaman but also the family who has sought their aid. The spiritual vulnerability created during a ceremony is immense, and a ritual misstep is akin to leaving a spiritual door open for malevolent influences to enter.

Furthermore, this web of ritual discipline extends far beyond the shaman alone. It creates a chain of shared responsibility that includes the participating family and the shaman's own kin. If any individual in this chain fails to observe the required protocols—be it a dietary restriction, a behavioral taboo, or a specific offering it can rupture the ritual's protective barrier, posing a potential threat to all involved. For instance, during a healing ceremony, if a family member violates a taboo on consuming a certain food, it could nullify the Igu work and exacerbate the patient's condition. This collective accountability reinforces the Igu role as a central pillar of the community's spiritual and social well-being, whose actions are deeply interwoven with the lives of everyone they serve.

In modern times, this intricate and fragile ecosystem of belief and practice faces significant challenges, primarily from religious conversion to other faiths such as Christianity. This shift has led many to consciously disregard or actively reject these traditional practices, creating friction and new forms of spiritual anxiety within the community. A poignant example can be found in death rituals. Traditionally, following a death, Idus are prohibited from leaving the home compound or its boundaries until the Alothru cleansing ceremony is performed. This quarantine is crucial to contain the ritual pollution associated with death and to prevent the unsettled spirit from causing disruption or attracting malevolent entities.

However, some converts, viewing these practices through a new theological lens, may move freely without observing this taboo. This act, while a personal expression of their new faith, is perceived by traditional community members as a profound transgression. It angers others because it is seen as flouting a communal safety measure, potentially inviting spiritual danger that could affect everyone, not just the individual convert. The free movement of an "uncleansed" person is viewed as spreading contamination, thereby disrupting the collective ritual practices and undermining the community's efforts to restore spiritual equilibrium after a death.

Nonetheless, the situation is not always one of stark opposition. A more nuanced and accommodating response has also emerged, demonstrating a

pragmatic adaptation. Some who have accepted different faiths show deep respect for their community and heritage by finding ways to accommodate traditional beliefs. During a funeral, for instance, a converted family might appoint and financially support a traditional Igu to perform the Alothru cleansing ceremony for those relatives and neighbors who have not converted. This act of accommodation serves multiple purposes: it honors the beliefs of the majority of attendees, ensures the community feels protected from spiritual peril, and allows the converts to participate in the social aspects of the funeral without violating their own conscience.

This practice creates a hybrid space where modernity and tradition negotiate a coexistence. It acknowledges that while personal faith may evolve, the individual remains part of a social fabric woven with ancient threads. It shows that respect for the community's spiritual well-being can transcend doctrinal differences. Therefore, the landscape of shamanic practice today is not merely one of erosion but also of complex negotiation, where the unwavering discipline of the Igu and Nyibu must now navigate a world where the chain of ritual responsibility is sometimes voluntarily broken, yet at other times, respectfully upheld by those who no longer believe, for the sake of the community that still does.

Ritual Accuracy and Purity of Performance

Within the traditional frameworks of the Idu and Galo, ritual correctness is not merely a procedural guideline but a profound moral duty. The performance of every chant, the presentation of every offering, and the execution of every sacred gesture must adhere strictly to the established sequence passed down through generations. This precision is paramount because, as elders often articulate, an incorrect chant is akin to administering the wrong medicine. It fails to address the spiritual ailment and, in a devastating reversal, actively invites misfortune upon the very community the ritual is designed to protect. A misstep is not a simple error; it is a rupture in the delicate dialogue with the spirit world.

Consequently, the Igu and Nyibu bear the immense responsibility of ensuring that every invocation and sacrifice is a perfect reflection of cosmic truth and balance. Their role transcends that of a mere performer; they are the guardians of a sacred contract. The efficacy of the ritual—and by extension, the health, harmony, and prosperity of the people—hinges on their disciplined

memory and sincere execution. This unwavering commitment to accuracy is what transforms a human action into a legitimate spiritual conduit, maintaining the fragile equilibrium between the human and the divine.

Observance of Taboos

The daily life of the Nyibu is regulated by strict taboos designed to protect ritual purity and spiritual strength. Similarly the Idu Mishmi people is governed by strict taboos, known as Angi, designed to protect ritual purity and spiritual strength. These taboos regulate various practices from birth to death, including agriculture, hunting, and other activities. Adherence to these norms is essential for the well-being and decorum of the community. During death rituals, only Igus (shamans) can conduct the Angi Athonu (cleansing ceremony). All rituals involve specific taboos, which conclude after observing a designated period. For instance, if someone dies in the village, the entire community observes Angi, abstaining from economic activities, agricultural

Sexual Abstinence

During major rituals, hunting, or village crises, shamans must avoid sexual contact. Violation weakens spiritual efficacy and endangers the community.

Menstrual Restrictions

Men avoid sharing utensils or sleeping areas with menstruating women. Women use separate doors. Idu women cannot enter kitchens or handle food during this period

Food Prohibitions

Certain animal parts restricted. First harvest cannot be consumed until proper rites performed. During Angi, Idus avoid onions, garlic, chili, and mushrooms.

Death & Birth Taboos

Shamans refrain from eating in houses where death or childbirth occurred until purification complete. Igus observe 10 -day Angi after death rituals; mothers follow 3-month restrictions.

Prohibition Days

After major rituals, specific days observed as closed periods. People refrain from travel, work, or outside contact to allow ritual power to settle.

practices, and mourning collectively for five days. Similarly, if a fire breaks out in a household, the village is considered polluted, and villagers are prohibited from visiting other villages or Idu households in neighboring villages for five days. These prohibitions, upheld by shamans and the community, preserve the sanctity of ritual life and maintain harmony between humans and spirits.

Abstinence and Self-Denial

For the Nyibu and Igu, spiritual strength is cultivated not through action, but through conscious and deliberate restraint. This discipline is a continuous ethical practice that sustains their readiness for sacred work (Fieldwork 2024; Chapter 2). Prior to major ceremonies, a Galo Nyibu often engages in fasting, purifying the body to become a clearer vessel for spiritual forces. Furthermore, this principle of protective abstinence extends critically to domestic life. During his wife's late pregnancy, both the Nyibu and Igu must adhere to strict taboos, avoiding funeral rites and refraining from killing any animal. These acts are considered spiritually volatile, and the negative energies associated with death and violence are believed to cross the spiritual-physical boundary, potentially causing harm to the vulnerable unborn child. Thus, abstinence and even periods of silence are not merely personal disciplines but essential, community-oriented duties that safeguard the shaman's power and ensure his ritual efficacy when called upon.

Service and Communal Obligation

The vocation of the Nyibu and Igu is fundamentally and irrevocably founded upon the principle of selfless service. He is a pivotal figure who assists families during times of illness, mediates in disputes, and guides them through states of ritual pollution, consistently performing these duties without seeking material reward. His actions whether healing, divining, or making sacrifices—are never for personal gain but are directed toward a single, higher purpose: the restoration of collective harmony and spiritual balance for the entire community. Elders poignantly describe this lifelong duty as “a chain of service that continues until death.” This powerful statement captures the very moral essence of Nyibuhood, conveying that spiritual knowledge is not a privilege to be enjoyed but a weight to be carried. The bearer of this knowledge is therefore bound to a path of continuous action aimed solely at communal well-being (Fieldwork 2024; Chapter 2).

Through the rigorous discipline of ritual purity, personal restraint, and unwavering service, the Igu and Nyibu comes to embody a profound indigenous moral philosophy. In this worldview, spiritual authority is utterly inseparable from profound obligation. His strength does not lie in command over others, or in the accumulation of wealth or status, but in his constant readiness to sacrifice personal comfort for the greater good. He becomes a living conduit of stability, dedicating his life to ensuring the spiritual equilibrium of his people. His ultimate power, therefore, is found not in what he takes, but in what he willingly gives his entire being, in a lifelong commitment to being his community spiritual anchor.

Burden and Privilege of Shamanic Vocation

Within the Galo and Idu community, Igu and Nyibuhood represents both a sacred privilege and a heavy personal burden. Every Nyibu interviewed during fieldwork described the calling as an honor that demands continual sacrifice. The role grants prestige through divine selection by Door-Siji, yet it binds the chosen individual to lifelong discipline and service (Fieldwork 2024; Chapter 2). Among the Idus, Igus are called to serve the people, sacrificing their personal freedom to fulfill their responsibilities. They bear immense responsibility for the community's well-being, as the trust of the people is bestowed upon them. They cannot refuse shamanic rituals, as these are essential for the family's welfare and represent a moral and sacred obligation to the community.

The Privilege of Divine Calling

The Nyibu and Igu occupies a revered position as healer, diviner, and protector. Villagers depend on him to restore health, avert misfortune, and interpret spiritual signs. His voice carries moral weight in resolving disputes and guiding communal decisions. Successful rituals or healing reinforce his standing, and the community acknowledges him as the bearer of Door-Siji's or Dorowos power. This reverence expresses gratitude for his role in preserving harmony between the human (Tani or emu) and spirit (Ui or khyinu) worlds.

The Burden of Obligation and Isolation

The same divine gift imposes physical, emotional, and social hardships. The Nyibu and Igu must observe strict abstinence, dietary limits, and ritual

seclusion. Ordinary pleasures are often denied to him, and breaches of taboo may bring illness or loss of spiritual potency. A Galo shaman Dagma Ropuk recalled that visions accompanying his selection left him sleepless and fearful, saying that the calling “was a weight that grew heavier each time the spirits appeared.” The burden also extends to family members who share financial strain from sacrificial requirements and the restrictions of Ari Rinam days. Families accept these demands because the Nyibu’s suffering is believed to secure the community’s safety (Fieldwork 2024; Chapter 2). In the context of the Idu, both the people and the shaman must strictly follow taboos. Failure to observe these taboos brings misfortune upon them.

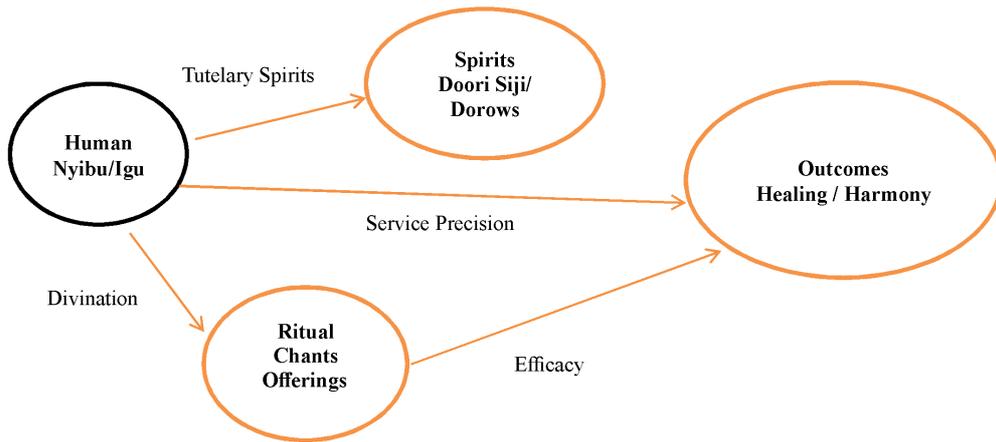
Power through Endurance

The coexistence of respect and hardship forms the ethical core of Igu and Nyibuhood. Power is defined not as privilege but as endurance. The Igu and Nyibu earns legitimacy by bearing pain and renouncing comfort for others. Galo elders repeatedly remarked that “the spirits choose those who can carry pain, not those who seek respect.” This perspective transforms leadership into moral labor sustained by humility and self-restraint (Fieldwork 2024; Chapter 2). The Igu among the Idu Mishmi is viewed by common Idu as a role requiring immense physical endurance and sacrifice, often at the expense of personal well-being. For instance, during death rituals, Igu perform continuous incantations and ritual dances for five days and nights, a demanding responsibility. However, among the Idu, the role of the Igu is considered a privileged position, bestowed only upon specific individuals. In the present context, a shortage of Igu has led to high demand, placing significant physical and mental pressure on those who serve in this role.

Continuity through Sacrifice

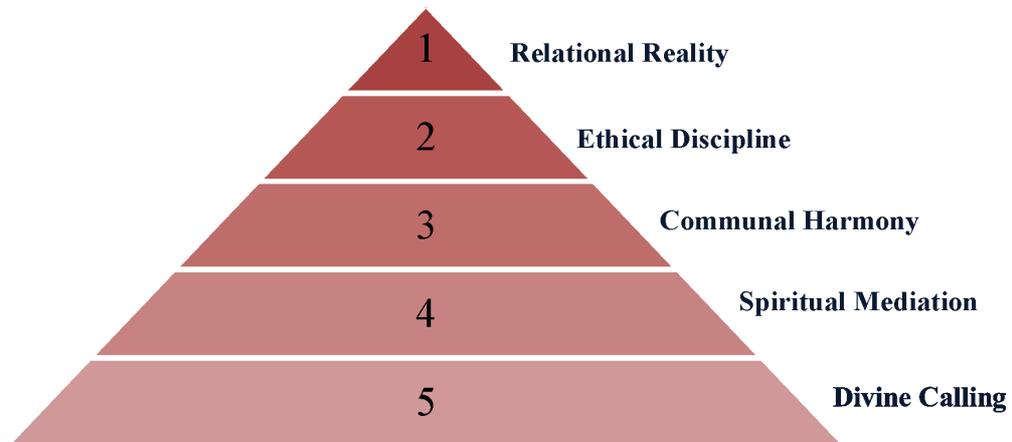
Despite suffering, Igu and Nyibus rarely abandon their vocation. Refusal to perform duties is believed to result in sickness or misfortune. Acceptance of the burden ensures both personal survival and communal balance. Through this unending cycle of service, abstinence, and sacrifice, the Igu and Nyibu embodies the principle that spiritual power is legitimate only when tempered by ethical discipline. Igu and Nyibuhood therefore unites privilege with responsibility, creating a moral framework in which suffering becomes the path to harmony.

Relational Network: Human-Spirit-Ritual



Discussion and Result

The decline of shamanism signals not just the loss of colorful customs, but the potential collapse of an entire indigenous moral and ontological system—one where humanity exists in negotiated, responsible relationship with the cosmos.



The survival of Nyibu and Igu traditions depends on maintaining the shaman’s relevance as a mediator between human experience and spiritual meaning. Their resilience lies not in timelessness, but in evolving while retaining their core epistemic and ethical foundation. In this traditional paradigm, the role does not chosen by the individual; rather, it forcibly selects them, often through a period of intense and traumatic initiation. This “call”

frequently manifests as a prolonged, unexplained illness or a state of “divine madness” a psychological crisis where the individual’s soul is believed to be traversing the spirit world. This harrowing experience is not seen as a malady to be cured, but as a necessary ordeal, a forging of the soul that authenticates the shaman’s future power and resilience. It is a transformative process where the individual is broken down and remade as a conduit for forces beyond the ordinary human realm.

It is within this context that the recent shift toward institutionalized training, such as the “Igu Ahito” (learning Igu) program, presents a profound philosophical contradiction. If genuine shamanic power is understood to be a direct bestowal from Doorri-Siji or the Dorows a grace earned through surviving a sacred ordeal then can it truly be transmitted in a classroom? This modern attempt to systematize and preserve the tradition risks producing mere technicians of ritual: individuals who can recite the chants and perform the gestures with accuracy but may lack the transformative, lived experience that grants genuine spiritual authority. The danger is the separation of ritual knowledge from the deep-seated ethical burden that comes from having been chosen. The divinely compelled shaman carries a weight that the trained technician may not fully comprehend; one is answerable to the spirits, the other potentially only to a curriculum.

This transition is symptomatic of a much larger crisis. The decline of shamanism is not merely the fading of colorful customs; it signals the potential collapse of an entire indigenous moral and ontological system. This system is maintained by a delicate web of essential taboos (Angi), which function as the fundamental regulatory mechanisms for maintaining harmony between the human and spirit worlds. These taboos are not arbitrary rules but the foundational protocols of a relational reality, where every action has a spiritual consequence, and where illness, misfortune, and morality are deeply intertwined.

The influx of modern, non-traditional religious influences often leads to the disregard of these Angi. When taboos are broken with impunity when the un-cleaned walk freely after a death, or when the sacred prohibitions around pregnancy are ignored it does more than just offend traditional sensibilities. It actively compromises the shaman’s power to mediate, as the communal spiritual integrity required for his work is fractured. The very logic of the world, in which he operates, begins to dissolve. When a community no longer

collectively believes that breaking a taboo can cause a harvest to fail or a child to fall ill, the relational reality that shamanism governs ceases to exist. The result is cultural fragmentation, a loss of a coherent indigenous philosophy that once provided explanation, meaning, and order to the universe.

Therefore, the continuation of this tradition, in a form that retains its spiritual core, is the ultimate test of a community's commitment to its own distinct philosophical way of being. It is a choice between preserving a world where humanity exists in a negotiated, responsible relationship with the cosmos, or acquiescing to a disenchanted world where such relationships are severed, and the figure of the shaman is reduced from a divinely-chosen mediator to a historical relic.

Conclusion

The Galo Nyibu and Idu Mishmi Igu represent shamanism as an ethical vocation grounded in divine selection, rigorous discipline, and uncompromising service. However, a critical examination reveals that this very foundation contains deep internal tensions. These tensions are not limited to external pressures of modernity but arise from contradictions inherent within the system itself—contradictions that challenge the continuity, legitimacy, and authenticity of these traditions in an accelerating socio-cultural transition. Romanticizing the shamanic vocation as a timeless institution obscures the dynamic and often disruptive transformations it is undergoing.

A central axis of conflict lies in the notion of divine compulsion, the defining marker of shamanic identity. In traditional contexts, shamanic initiation is triggered by severe physical or psychological crisis—prolonged illness, visions, or episodes often described as “divine madness.” This ordeal functions as an authentication mechanism: the community witnesses the initiate's suffering, transformation, and eventual mastery over the spirit world, thereby granting them unquestionable moral and ritual authority. This process embeds what may be termed the “ethical burden” of shamanhood, wherein spiritual power is inseparable from a life-altering experience of vulnerability and obligation.

The emergence of institutionalized training programs such as Igu Ahito introduces a fundamental philosophical shift. The transition from a model of “being chosen” to one of “choosing to be trained” risks producing ritual technicians who may master procedural knowledge—chants, offerings, ritual sequences—without undergoing the transformative ordeal that confers

charismatic authority. This raises a critical question: can shamanhood, understood as an ontological state of being rather than a technical skill set, be formally taught?

The idealization of the shaman as solely a self-sacrificing moral agent warrants critical scrutiny. While service is central to the vocation, the role historically carries significant social capital and influence. Shamans function as mediators of spiritual knowledge, custodians of tradition, and actors within local political and economic networks. Their authority to interpret the will of spirits indirectly shapes decision-making processes. Thus, the decline of shamanism is not only a spiritual loss but also a reconfiguration of community power dynamics—often shifting authority toward educated elites, Christian leaders, or state-appointed representatives.

Modernity does not threaten these traditions through simple external disruption; rather, its impact is epistemic. Conversion to religions that reject local spirit ontologies, and the increasing adoption of biomedical and scientific rationalities, erode the metaphysical foundations upon which shamanic practice rests. When illness is interpreted strictly as a biological event and taboos (angi) lose their communal force, the shaman's interventions become symbolically weak or socially irrelevant. This represents not merely the disappearance of practitioners but the dissolution of an entire relational worldview—an indigenous philosophy where humans coexist within a sentient, spirit-filled cosmos.

Community responses to this crisis are neither uniform nor passive. Initiatives such as Igu Ahito represent deliberate strategies to codify and preserve knowledge previously transmitted through oral and experiential means. Likewise, hybrid practices—such as Christian families hiring an Igu for specific funerary rites—illustrate pragmatic cultural negotiation rather than simple compromise. These adaptations function as acts of cultural mediation, enabling communities to maintain social cohesion despite diverging ontological commitments.

Ultimately, the survival of the Nyibu and Igu traditions is a measure of the community's capacity to sustain its philosophical distinctiveness under conditions of rapid change. The challenge lies in reconciling the indispensable authenticity conferred by spiritual ordeal with the practical necessity of structured knowledge transmission. Their continuity will depend not on preserving rituals in static form but on maintaining the shaman's relevance as

a mediator between human experience and spiritual meaning. The resilience of these traditions, therefore, is not rooted in timelessness but in their ability to evolve while retaining their core epistemic and ethical foundation.

Declarations

Funding: The authors declare that this research received no funding from any source.

Funding and Conflicts of Interest/Competing Interests: The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest or competing interests.

Glossary of Main Terms: It should be noted that variations in pronunciation can lead to differences in exact spellings across different regions of Idus and Galos.

- Abotani: A group of tribes from Arunachal Pradesh.
- Alompra: The Idu Mishmi word for onion and garlic.
- Alo-we Ajiru mu: The act of an Idu Mishmi shaman (Igu) invoking tutelary spirits (Dorows) before performing a ritual.
- Alothru: An Idu Mishmi cleansing ceremony performed by a shaman after a death ritual.
- Angi: Idu Mishmi taboos.
- Angi Athonu: An Idu Mishmi cleansing ceremony.
- Ari Rinam: A Galo taboo observe.
- Doori-Siji: The Galo primordial creator and the origin source for all Nyibus (shamans).
- Dorows: Idu Mishmi tutelary spirits.
- Emu: The Idu Mishmi word for human.
- Galo: An ethnic group from Arunachal Pradesh (part of the Abotani).
- Gumin Nyibus: Galo shamans (Nyibus) who receive powers from benevolent spirits to perform healing and welfare rituals.
- Idu Mishmi: An ethnic group from Arunachal Pradesh (part of the Abotani).
- Igu: An Idu Mishmi shaman.
- Igu Ahito: An Idu Mishmi shaman learning program.

- Inchi: The Idu Mishmi word for chili.
- Khinu: Idu Mishmi spirits.
- Marshana: The Idu Mishmi word for the anacyclus (toothache) plant.
- Nyibu: A Galo shaman.
- Poori-Siji: In the Galo language, the term for 'power giver to spirit.
- Pwpw Sinam: The act of a Galo shaman (Nyibu) using an egg during a ritual.
- Regjin Kanam: The act of a Galo shaman (Nyibu) using a pig's liver during a ritual.
- Tago Nyibus: Galo shamans (Nyibus) who draw power from malevolent spirits and are known for divination and trance rituals.
- Tani: The Galo word for human.
- Uyi: Spirits.
- Uyus: Galo ancestral spirits.

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