



# A Liminal Exploration of Traditional Tagin Marriage Rituals and Ceremonial Practices

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**Abstract:** This article examines the transitional aspects of traditional Tagin marriage rites and ceremonies, using Arnold van Gennep's foundational work, Rites of Passage, as its conceptual framework. The study examines the pre-liminal, liminal, and post-liminal phases of the Tagin community's marriage practices, highlighting the transforming nature of these rituals. The study elucidates how these events facilitate people's transitions between social ranks and reinforce community bonds by applying ethnographic fieldwork and qualitative research. The results indicate that the three phases are crucial to the Tagin marriage process, serving as a conduit for individual and communal development. This inquiry advances the greater scholarly knowledge of liminality and underlines the cultural distinctiveness and complexity of Tagin's marital practices. Its views retain importance for academics exploring the intersection of ritual, identity, and social structure in tribal societies.

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## Introduction

The word liminality comes from the Latin word *limin*, which signifies threshold (Weber, 525-536: 1995)<sup>1</sup>. The folklorist and ethnographer Arnold Van Gennep coined the word *liminal*, defining it as a time when a person's social status changes within a ritual framework<sup>2</sup>. Gennep discovered that rituals in diverse cultures worldwide may be divided into three stages: pre-liminal (before) and post-liminal (after), with the liminal condition positioned in the centre when shown on a timeline (10-11:1960)<sup>3</sup>. For instance, pre-liminal rituals (or separation rites) were

done to remove an initiate from the old and routine world. In contrast, post-liminal rituals were done to aid the reintegration of the initiate into society. The marginal or liminal phase was developed during the in-between era, defined by liminal rites. During this phase, the initiate's identity was disassembled, confused, and reshaped to reintegrate into society with a new identity and standing. According to Gennep, the idea of liminality could be considered universal, and the indications of liminality were related to changes in status, location, and time<sup>4</sup>. For instance, a marriage might be regarded as a transition between distinct situations, whereas moving away from one's dwelling is a transition between locales.

Given that it provides a thorough framework for examining the transitional stages crucial to the marriage rituals of the Tagin tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, the liminal technique is important for understanding these ceremonies. Gennep and Turner theorise that liminality focuses on the transitional ritual phase when persons are suspended between their previous identity and their new social role. In the context of Tagin marriage rituals, this technique elucidates how the community navigates the intricate processes of separation, transformation, and reintegration that are vital to the social and cultural fabric of the tribe. The liminal framework leads to a greater understanding of the symbolic gestures, rituals, and social interactions that sustain and perpetuate the Tagin tribe's wider social structure and cultural practices while simultaneously sanctioning the marriage of two individuals.

The Tagin tribe is an indigenous community in Arunachal Pradesh. Geographically, the Tagin people live mostly in Upper Subansiri, with small populations in the neighbouring Shiyomi district. Their settlement area is known for its lush green valleys and dense forests. With raging rivers and rivulets, almost the whole Tagin region has steep, rugged, and precipitous hills and mountains.

Culturally, the Tagin tribe is part of a larger Tani group, which includes the Adi, Apatani, Nyishi, and Galo. The Tagin tribe preserves a vibrant cultural heritage, emphasising traditional practices, folklore, and oral traditions. They trace their lineage from Abotani. According to a Tagin legend, Tongni or Tani was their first human ancestor (Sarkar, 4:1994)<sup>5</sup>. The tribe has their tradition of the creation of the Universe, humans and other forms of life on Earth. The tribe practices animism, worshipping natural deities and ancestors. Their rich cultural life is beautifully displayed through their everyday life, including attire, food habits, social practices and language. Their clan-based social structure is defined by sophisticated kinship

systems that govern social interactions, including rites, rituals, and other traditions. The Tagin people communicate in the Tagin language, categorised under the Western Tani branch of the Tibeto-Burman language family, itself a subset of the broader Sino-Tibetan language family (Post, 153-186: 2012)<sup>6</sup>.

The Tagin tribe, who practise animism, bases their ceremonies on the veneration of nature deities, ancestors, and spirits. It indicates a strong connection with their ancestors and the environment. These rituals are crucial in sustaining social order and safeguarding the community's well-being, as they seek the favour of spiritual powers for agricultural success, health, and protection. Among the most major rituals are those related to life events, notably marriage. Tagin marriage rites are extensive and symbolically rich, encompassing events that symbolise the passage of persons from singlehood to wedded life. These rites involve discussions of bride price, ceremonial exchanges, and blessings, and all are handled with great reverence for the spiritual beliefs underlying Tagin culture. Marital rites serve as a bridge between two people, families and communities, reaffirming spiritual harmony and social ties while furthering the social fabric.

## **Methodology**

The researcher employs a participatory methodology to understand the cultural and social dynamics as part of their ethnographic and qualitative study of Tagin marriage rituals. This involves researcher participating in the rituals and embedding themselves within the community. Interviews with elders and community members, such as *Nyubu* (priest), *Gaon Bura* and *Buri* (the village headman and woman), and other figures who are regarded as guardians of the tribe's oral traditions and cultural knowledge, enhance this approach even more and provide crucial insights into the social and historical significance of the rituals. Focus groups are arranged to investigate group perspectives and shared understandings to discover common themes and variances in the rituals. To track changes and continuities in the marriage customs and place their findings within the larger historical and cultural context of the Tagin tribe, the researcher carefully examines historical records and ethnographic accounts. The data is documented and interpreted using field notes, audio and video recordings, and theme analysis to reveal the rituals' cultural significance and underlying meanings. By stressing the marriage rites' symbolic significance and social roles within the community, this approach guarantees a profound understanding of the Tagin tribe's customs.

## **Analytical Framework**

Genep's concept of liminality, which provides an extensive framework for analysing traditions and rituals, has been utilised to comprehend the traditional marriage rites and rituals of the Tagin tribe. Marriage ceremonies, which usually represent major changes in social status and personal identity, are best understood in light of this tripartite framework. (Genep, 10-11:1960)<sup>7</sup>.

The liminal stage, which Victor Turner, a renowned anthropologist, considered a critical component in comprehending the underlying structures of society, was emphasised heavily in his theoretical framework (Sharaby, 25–44:2011)<sup>8</sup>. Turner contended that the liminal phase—marked by ambiguity, transition, and suspension of conventional social roles—offers deep insights into the latent structures governing cultural and social orders.

Turner's contributions deepen Van Genep's original model by explaining the significance of the liminal as both a space of transition and a window into the essential nature of human sociality. He maintained that the liminal period functions as a site of transformation, where participants temporarily step outside their established roles, enabling the restructuring of social hierarchies and identities (Turner, 3-19:1987)<sup>9</sup>. He postulated that studying the processes inherent in the liminal stage could illuminate the underlying cultural dynamics and values. This focus on the liminal stage as a crucible for social change and renewal offers a more nuanced understanding of cultural rituals and rites of passage, revealing how societies negotiate transformation and maintain equilibrium.

In the context of the Tagin tribe's marriage traditions, adopting Genep's liminal method offers a detailed analysis of how these rituals support the transition from singlehood to married life. The pre-liminal period comprises rituals that indicate the separation of the people from their prior position. The liminal period, marked by uncertainty and change, is when the fundamental marriage rites occur, signifying the shift. Finally, the post-liminal phase signifies the reintegration of the people into society with their new status as a married couple. This analytical approach not only underlines the cultural relevance of these rituals but also stresses their function in sustaining social cohesiveness and continuity. Viewing the Tagin marriage customs through the perspective of liminality may give us deeper insights into the cultural and social forces at play.

### **Core characteristics of the Pre-liminal phase**

The pre-liminal phase marks the initial stage of a rite of passage, where an individual begins transitioning from one social status to another. It is characterised by a symbolic separation from the person's previous identity, often involving rituals that signify their detachment from past roles and connections (Gennep, 11:1960)<sup>10</sup>. These preparatory ceremonies, such as blessings or purification rites, help prepare the individual for the transformation ahead, reinforcing the importance of leaving behind their former life.

This phase in marriage is marked by a significant detachment from the past, where the bride and groom symbolically and physically distance themselves from their previous social identities within their natal families. This separation is fundamental as it prepares them to leave behind their old roles and enter a new social unit as a married couple. The rituals associated with this phase, such as offerings to deities or ancestors, ceremonial feasts, and blessings from elders, are essential in marking this transition. These ceremonies help the couple prepare for their new life together and invoke spiritual protection and favour, ensuring a smooth passage into their new roles.

As the couple undergoes this transformation, they are also ritually separated from their familial groups, reflecting the changing societal expectations that come with marriage. In many societies, family and social ties are central to the community's structure, and transitioning from being part of a natal family to creating a new household is a major shift. The symbolic disengagement from kinship ties during this pre-liminal period focuses on the couple's shift in responsibilities and social identity as they prepare to establish a new home and begin a new life chapter.

### **Core characteristics of the Liminal Phase**

The liminal or transitional phase is the central stage in the liminal framework where individuals are in an ambiguous state, neither belonging to their previous status nor fully integrated into their new one (Turner, 3-19:1987)<sup>11</sup>. This phase is marked by rituals that symbolize transformation and the creation of new identities.

In this phase, individuals are in a transition state, where they are "in-between" social roles or identities (Turner, 94:1969)<sup>12</sup>. In the context of marriage, this phase sees the bride and groom suspended between their former identities and their new identity as a married couple. They are not fully integrated into their new roles and no longer belong to their previous social categories. This period of ambiguity and

marginality creates a sense of uncertainty as they occupy a space that is neither fully part of their old life nor yet part of their new one. Gennep identifies this as a critical time of transition, during which participants undergo rituals of transformation, signifying the instability of their social status (21: 1960)<sup>13</sup>.

The primary purpose of this liminal phase is to facilitate the passage from one identity to another. The rituals performed during this time guide individuals through the transformation, ensuring they are prepared to be reintegrated into society with their new social roles. These symbolic acts often represent the change in identity and social position, allowing the participants to move from one stage of life to the next. The liminal phase, therefore, is essential for enabling this shift, as it marks the point of social transformation that leads to the adoption of a new identity within the community.

### **Core characteristics of the post-liminal phase**

The final stage of Gennep's rites of passage framework is called the post-liminal phase, often referred to as the assimilation or re-incorporation phase (11-21:1960)<sup>14</sup>. This phase comprises ceremonies that reintegrate persons into society with their new status. After transforming, the individual reintegrates into society with a new identity and responsibilities, marking the closure of the transition process in the post-liminal phase (Gennep, 11:1960)<sup>15</sup>. This phase, often accompanied by public rituals or ceremonies, signifies the community's formal recognition of the individual's new social standing. Whether it is a marriage ceremony where a couple is accepted as married or an initiation ritual marking the transition from childhood to adulthood, the individual is expected to assume the rights and responsibilities associated with their new role. In marriage, for instance, this includes establishing a home, having children, and fulfilling obligations to each other's families. Symbolic acts, such as special apparel or public celebrations, further confirm the person's new status. These gestures acknowledge the change and codify and legitimise the social relationships and duties formed during the liminal period. The post-liminal phase, in essence, solidifies the individual's reintegration into society, as seen in marriage rituals where a community feast presents the couple to the community, cementing their new societal roles and responsibilities.

### **Analysing the phases of liminality in traditional Tagin marriage**

The institution of indigenous marriage in the Tagin tribe is defined by various customs and ceremonies. It refers to a system where specific practices serve as the

foundation for the institutional framework of marriage. Regardless of cohabitation or parenthood, marriage cannot be recognised without the basic rituals and ceremonies central to traditional marital customs. (Neba, 69:2024)<sup>16</sup>. Consequently, a traditional marriage among the Tagin tribe is characterised by a distinctly defined union established by several norms, rituals, ceremonies, and evident behaviours that symbolise the institution of marriage. Rituals and ceremonies naturally hold interpretative importance and convey certain messages. However, they extend beyond mere practical implementation and encompass intrinsic significance.

Analysis of the inherent symbolism of the items used in the rituals may further facilitate comprehension of their significance. Examining marriage customs among the Tagins reveals complex cultural traditions that signify important life changes. To conduct a thorough analysis and comparative study of the rituals in the traditional marriage system of the Tagin tribe, they have been classified into three main phases: the pre-liminal phase (initiation stage), the liminal phase (stage of separation), and the post-liminal phase (stage of reincorporation).

*Nying/Nelu Nanam* is the prevalent term for the Tagin marriage institution, and the ceremony is referred to as *Nyeda*. (Neba, 122:2024)<sup>17</sup>. In Tagin tribal society, clan exogamy and tribe endogamy are the marriage laws. The society is patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal. The society does not endorse pre-marital sexual freedom.

The Tagin community regards the married connection with high reverence; accordingly, marriage is a relationship between two families and clans. According to the patrilineal system of the Tagin, once a girl gets married, she belongs to her husband's family and the children produced by her carry the surname (which indicates the clan) of their father. A married pair needs to go through a set of societal rules regarded by completing rituals known as *Layap* or *Nayap* (ritual ceremony for newly married couples), which will be followed by the ultimate marriage ceremony of *Nyeda*.

### **Analysis of the pre-liminal rituals in Tagin marriage**

The pre-liminal stage of Tagin marriage rites is identified by a sequence of events and activities that prepare the bride and groom for their new positions in society by symbolically severing them from their former identities. This stage corresponds with Van Gennep's concept of separation, in which people break away from their previous social and family bonds to embark on a new stage in life.

The Tagin ritual *Mimpa-Lemi (Darle-Kotar)* represents the initial step in this separation. In this ritual, the groom's family, led by the *nyetam* (negotiator), formally

asks for the bride's hand by bringing offerings such as *rekma* (pigs), smoked pork, and other meats to the bride's home (Neba, 72:2024)<sup>18</sup>. This gesture signifies the groom's readiness to enter the marriage and begins negotiations between the two families. The bride's family and extended community, referred to *asha dohane*, play an essential role in gathering the bride's wealth, symbolizing the collective effort to prepare for the forthcoming union.

This phase is especially significant for the bride, as it marks the beginning of her social transition from daughter to wife. The marital transaction for the bride and groom's marriage life not only signifies the closure of their past role within their respective natal family but also emphasises the deep social transformation they are about to undergo. This ritual exchange serves as a symbolic acknowledgement of her detachment from her birth family and the responsibilities she is leaving behind, paving the way for her to adopt new roles and obligations within her marital family.

The second phase of the Tagin marriage, known as the ritual of *Sepia Tenam*, embodies the pre-liminal phase by focusing on the symbolic and spiritual preparation of the groom's family for the forthcoming union. This stage aligns with the characteristic pre-liminal theme of separation, as extensive rituals are conducted to sever ties with previous identities. During this phase, a priest engages in a month-long period of rites and chants to appease spirits and ensure harmony within the family. The central act of felling the hibi tree to construct ritual altars highlights the symbolic detachment from the past. The tree becomes the medium through which sacrificial offerings are made, signifying the family's readiness to embrace new social obligations, marking their transition from the past to the future.

The subsequent visit of the groom's family to the bride's village with gifts of *opo*, meat, and Mithuns (*Bos Frontalis*), exchanged for traditional ornaments from the bride's family, represents a further step in this transition (Sarkar, 79:1999)<sup>19</sup>. This exchange of material wealth serves as a tangible preparation for the marriage. It reflects the bride's gradual separation from her natal family as she prepares to take on new roles and responsibilities within her marital household. The ritual symbolises the severance from her former social identity and the anticipation of her forthcoming status as a wife. Thus, the *Sepia Tenam* ritual effectively encapsulates the essence of the pre-liminal phase in Tagin marriage practices.

### **Analysis of the liminal rituals in Tagin marriage**

The liminal phase of the Tagin tribe's marriage rites is distinguished by a transitory time when the bride and groom shift between social positions, leaving behind their



prior statuses but not entirely incorporating them into their new ones. This phase coincides with the notion of being "betwixt and between," since people are uncertain, neither belonging completely to their former family systems nor yet accepting their new marital responsibilities (Turner, 3-19:1987)<sup>20</sup>. The rituals of *Roi-Depar* and *Harcho Enam* exemplify this transitional stage.

In *Roi-Depar*, the focus is on the reciprocal exchange of gifts between the bride and groom's families (Neba, 124:2024)<sup>21</sup>. This exchange symbolises the deepening of ties between the two families as they approach the final stages of the marriage transaction. Yet, the process is not fully completed, reflecting the in-between nature of the liminal phase. The negotiations led by the *nyetam* (mediator) determine the pace and structure of the remaining marriage process, which can extend over one or two years, depending on the families' economic standing. This ongoing negotiation underscores the uncertainty and transition of this phase, as the finality of the marriage is yet to be determined.

In *Harcho Enam*, the groom's family is formally informed of the bride's family's intentions, setting the stage for the eventual conclusion of the marriage rituals (Neba, 125: 2024)<sup>22</sup>. The dispatch of the groom's party to the bride's home, laden with meat, smoked fish, and *opo* (a traditional fermented millet beer) and *Mithuns* signifies a growing sense of community and shared responsibility. Later in the evening gathering, where the bride's female relatives sing *nyeme kabnam* (songs of blessings, mourning, and departure), reflects the emotional and social ambiguity of the moment (Riddi, 106:2006)<sup>23</sup>. These songs mourn the bride's departure from her natal family while blessing her for her future role, encapsulating the essence of social transformation during this liminal phase.

### **Analysis of the post-liminal rituals in Tagin marriage**

The post-liminal phase in the Tagin tribe's marriage rituals reflects the final reintegration of the individuals into society, marked by the formal recognition of their new roles and responsibilities as husband and wife. In this phase, the bride and groom are now acknowledged as a married couple by their community, and the ceremonial practices emphasize their acceptance of their new social status.

The ritual of *Neme Nyamlin Alu* symbolizes the emotional farewell of the bride by her family. It marks her departure from her natal home and her transition into her new life as a married woman. The bride dons the traditional *Jelli-Jebu*, a red woollen gown, along with various ornaments such as the *dengse* (a belt adorned

with metal discs), *tashing segmin* (tiny beads), and *rungbin* (earrings)<sup>24</sup>. This attire, deeply symbolic of her new status, showcases her reintegration into society under her new identity. The procession of the bride, accompanied by her family and friends, toward the groom's village, illustrates the public recognition of her transformation.

The ritual culminates with the ceremonial *subu panam* (Mithuns sacrifice), underscoring the collective and spiritual significance of the union. The exchange of marital wealth between the bride and groom's families, distributed among those who have contributed to the wedding, reinforces the social bonds and obligations formed through the marriage. This exchange is not merely economic but also symbolic of the couple's new responsibilities within the larger community.

In the post-liminal phase of the Tagin marriage, the ritual of *Namja Chanam/Namja Koba* exemplifies the reintegration of the newlywed couple into society, symbolizing their acceptance into a new social identity as husband and wife and son and daughter-in-law<sup>25</sup>. The construction of a special ladder at the groom's house is a physical and symbolic conduit through which the couple and the *nyeda* party are welcomed into the groom's home. This act signifies the final step in the transformative journey, where the couple, having undergone the marriage rites, now enters the household together as a unified social entity.

Much like the broader characteristics of the post-liminal phase, this stage reinforces the couple's new status and solidifies their transition. They ascend the ladder with marital gifts and exchanges in the form of meat, *opo* and other traditional materials. These exchanges represent a continuation of familial ties and the formal recognition of the couple's new rights and responsibilities within the community. The ritual emphasises the formation of new social bonds and fulfilling obligations, marking the couple's reintegration into society with their new social roles fully accepted and legitimized.

## Conclusion

Analysis of the Tagin tribe's marriage rituals through various liminal phases reveals an important and sophisticated system of social transformation that highlights the importance of kinship, identity, and communal integration. The transition into a new social position is represented at every step of the process, from the bride's symbolic separation from her biological family to her ambiguous transformation during the transitional rites to her final reintegration with new responsibilities. In addition to being ceremonial, the rites are highly symbolic, ensuring the bride's

social acceptance, protection from the spirits, and the community's recognition of her new status. Through this rigorous process, the Tagin tribe emphasises the need to maintain social ties and continuity while highlighting the relationship between individual development and collective identity. These rites of passage effectively support tribal beliefs by tying the transition of individual marriage to the broader social and spiritual fabric of the Tagin tribal society.

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