

# Oral Traditions Associated with Mithun (*Bos Frontalis*) Among the Tagin Tribe Of Arunachal Pradesh

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## **Abstract:**

Oral Traditions, widely considered as one of the earliest mode of human communication plays an indispensable role in transmitting knowledge, art, ideas and cultural material across generations, thus strengthening and keeping cultures alive. They become pertinent particularly among the pre literate tribal communities of Northeast India where there is a paucity of written records. Similar to many tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, the Tagin community also lack a written script, however they possess rich Oral Traditions which primarily forms the basis of understanding the historical evolution and culture of the tribe. Among the plethora of Tagin myths and legends on creation, traditions associated with Mithun (*Bos Frontalis*) is considered one of the significant components of the oral literature of the tribe. As Mithun, the state animal of Arunachal Pradesh, since time immemorial has played an important role in the social, cultural and economic lives of the Tagin community. Deeply rooted in mythology and being an integral part of the cultural life of the Tagin, Mithun is considered as a yardstick to measure wealth, prestige, calibration and instrument of peace and settlement among the Tagin. Thus the paper endeavours to study the oral traditions on Mithun (*Bos Frontalis*) and explore related beliefs and practices which are still prevalent among the Tagin of Arunachal Pradesh. The study is mostly based on primary data collected through an extensive fieldwork among the Tagin of Upper Subansiri district, Arunachal Pradesh while for secondary data all published literature such as books, magazines, articles, journals etc. were referred.

**Keywords:** Tagin, Oral Traditions, Mithun, Bride Price, Sacrifice.

## **1. Introduction**

Oral traditions constitute the principal medium through which many indigenous societies remember, interpret, and transmit their past. In regions where written documentation developed late or remain limited, narratives preserved in ritual chants, myths, folktales, stories and performative recitations operate as living archives that shape and actively regulate present behaviour, social conduct, legitimise institutions, and sustain collective identity. The study of such traditions is therefore indispensable for reconstructing the history of these communities, understanding the indigenous knowledge systems and recognizing the moral universe within which they situate themselves.

Among the tribal groups of Arunachal Pradesh, the relationship between people, animals, and the sacred environment forms a fundamental aspect of cultural life. More specifically, human relationships with nature including animals are embedded within cosmology, belief system, economy, and political life. Animals are not merely resources; they are mediators of value, markers of prestige, and participants in sacred exchange. Among these, the Mithun (*Bos frontalis*) occupies a position of extraordinary prominence. Distributed across the hill tracts of Northeast India and adjoining areas, it has long served

as a critical axis around which ritual authority, kinship alliance, wealth circulation and overall cultural life revolve.

For the Tagin tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, Mithun is far more than a livestock. Besides being considered as an invaluable economic asset, it is remembered in origin narratives, invoked in priestly chants, demanded in marriage negotiations, and mobilised in dispute settlement. Ownership of Mithun translates into social recognition, while its sacrifice becomes a channel of communication with divine forces. Through these multiple roles, the animal weaves together the material and the metaphysical dimensions of life in the Tagin society. The prominence accorded to Mithun is repeatedly affirmed in oral accounts that trace its origin to divine agency and its transfer to human society through ancestral mediation. Consequently, any attempt to comprehend Tagin worldview, hierarchy, and value system remains incomplete without examining the traditions attached to this animal.

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to document and analyse the oral traditions relating to Mithun among the Tagin tribe of Arunachal Pradesh and to explore how these narratives inform contemporary beliefs and customary practices. By doing so, the article contributes to the broader discourse on indigenous historiography, where memory, myth, and lived experience serve as legitimate sources of historical understanding. In addition to this, by foregrounding indigenous interpretation, the paper seeks to contribute to broader methodological conversations on how historians and anthropologists might approach societies where memory itself functions as archive.

Scholarly engagement with Mithun across the Eastern Himalayan region has developed along multiple trajectories, ranging from administrative documentation and livestock science to ethnography, folklore, and political ecology. While these contributions have substantially enriched knowledge about the animal's distribution, management, and ceremonial value, the relationship between narrative authority and contemporary institutional life remains comparatively underexplored. A review of existing works helps situate the present study within this evolving intellectual landscape.

Early ethnographic observations of Himalayan societies, including those of Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf's, *Tribes of India: The Struggle for Survival* (1982) drew attention to the conversion of animal wealth into prestige and political influence. Feasts, exchanges, and sacrificial events were shown to generate authority through public display. While these contributions documented the centrality of large bovines, they rarely examined the narrative foundations that rendered such transactions legitimate. Later anthropological contributions shifted toward symbolic and ecological interpretation. Philippe Descola, in *Beyond Nature and Culture* (2013), challenged rigid separations between humans and animals, encouraging scholars to view interspecies relations as components of broader ontological systems. Similarly, Tim Ingold in *The Perception of the Environment* (2000), argued that livelihood, environment, and belief form an indivisible field of relations an insight crucial for understanding why pastoral wealth cannot be reduced to economics alone.

Building on such perspectives, recent work from Northeast India has emphasised ambiguity between domestication and wildness. Radhika Govindrajan, in *Animal Intimacies* (2018), demonstrated how animals inhabit relational spaces shaped by affect, politics, and care. Though her ethnography is located in the central Himalayas, the conceptual framing has influenced readings of Mithun across Arunachal Pradesh. Within Northeast India, scholars have persistently noted the animal's indispensability in sacrificial and exchange systems. Verrier Elwin in *India's North-East frontier in the nineteenth century* (1959), interpreted sacrifice as communication between humans and divine forces, a formulation that resonates strongly with Tagin priestly explanations recorded during fieldwork. More recently, Abhishruti Sarma's article 'Culture, consumption, and conservation: The Mithun in Arunachal Pradesh'

which is a result of multi-site fieldwork highlights how cultures of consumption and conservation surround Mithun and how state conservation projects encounter local practice and value systems; her analysis demonstrates the animal's simultaneous cultural, economic and ecological stakes in Arunachal Pradesh. Likewise, Palme Borthakur and Tumsum Ekke's article 'Significance of Mithun (*Bos Frontalis*) in traditional practices among tribes of Arunachal Pradesh and its related Conservation issues', document its use in marriage payments, penalties, and festival obligations, reinforcing its status as both economic resource and ritual necessity.

Indigenous and regionally grounded scholarship has made particularly significant contributions. Tana Showren, in his writings on Tani traditions, particularly in *The Nyishi of Arunachal Pradesh: An ethnohistorical study* (2021), underscores the indispensability of Mithun in marriage negotiations and the consolidation of kinship ties. Similarly, Tob Tarin in *Nyishi world* (2008), documents how ceremonial exchange involving Mithun sustains networks of reciprocity even amidst rapid socio-economic change. Furthermore, Sunilal Basumatary article 'Significance of 'Mithun' in the Nyishi Folk Culture and Tradition among the Nyishi', reiterate the animal's function as a marker of collective identity, spiritual mediation, and customary justice. Particularly important are works emerging from Tagin scholarship itself. Ashan Rididi, in *Traditional institutions of the Tagin: Continuity and change* (2006) presents a study of traditional institutions and demonstrates that customary authority among the Tagin tribe is inseparable from ritual sanction and collective belief. Gandhi Neba Siga, examining customary law, in *Customary laws of the Tagin Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh* (2019), shows how compensation, penalty, and reconciliation frequently involve Mithun as material embodiment of justice. These analyses indicate that the animal operates not only within ceremonial space but also within juridical reasoning. Complementing these approaches, institutional and veterinary research, particularly from the ICAR National Research Centre on Mithun and field-based studies by Tilling Tayo, titled 'Traditional method of Mithun production system in Arunachal Pradesh' provide detailed accounts of rearing systems, ownership patterns, and management strategies. Although primarily technical, such works inadvertently demonstrate how social arrangements such as tenancy, ear-marking, and community enclosures are embedded in collective norms rather than individual enterprise.

Despite this substantial body of scholarship, an important question remains insufficiently addressed. Oral narratives are frequently referenced as cultural background, yet their function as norm-producing authorities is rarely analysed in depth. How myths of origin validate present transactions, how divine gifting becomes entitlement, and how ancestral memory transforms wealth into legitimacy require closer investigation. For the Tagin community, systematic interpretation of priestly recitations and inherited accounts in relation to everyday institutional practice is still limited. By placing these narrative materials at the centre, the present study proposes that Mithun's enduring prominence cannot be explained solely through economy, ritual habit, or conservation value. Instead, it must be understood through the interpretive frameworks that make action binding and meaningful. Through this emphasis, the article advances a locally grounded yet theoretically informed contribution to debates on indigenous historiography and multispecies governance.

## 2. Objectives

The present study strives to fulfil the following major objectives:

- i. To explore the Oral Traditions associated with Mithun (*Bos Frontalis*) among the Tagin tribe of Arunachal Pradesh.
- ii. To examine the beliefs and customary practices associated with Mithun (*Bos Frontalis*) among the Tagin tribe of Arunachal Pradesh.

### 3. Methodology

The study was conducted in the Tagin inhabited district of Upper Subansiri, Arunachal Pradesh and is ethno historical in nature. The primary data has been collected by undertaking an extensive field survey in the area of the study. Further, during the field tour and survey a number of interview methods such as informal discussion, personal interviews, questionnaire, scheduled and unscheduled interviews etc. were used in order to get the relevant data. The researcher has also engaged in participatory research method so as to collect the relevant data by carefully observing the day to day activities and participating in various socio-cultural affairs of the tribe concerned. Also, the researcher being a Tagin herself has drawn inference from her own experience, knowledge and observation on the subject. Audio visual tools such as camera and tape recorder were used in recording of the oral narratives as presented by the village elders and experts. Consent forms have been collected from interviews as a proof of the authentic nature of the collected data.

The secondary data has been collected by consulting all the published and unpublished research articles, journals, books, gazetteers, newspapers, district handbooks, and documents of different authors. The university, district and state libraries have been visited for an elaborate study on the Tagin society. Also, the department of Directorate of Research Itanagar and Department of Animal Husbandry, Veterinary & Dairy Development, Nirjuli were consulted for the compilation of the article.

### 4. Results and Discussion

#### Narratives on the Origin and Destiny of Mithun

Often dubbed as the 'Cattle of Hilly region', the Mithun (*Bos Frontalis*) is a unique semi domesticated bovine species exclusively found in the hill regions of Northeast India, Myanmar, Bhutan, Malaysia, Bangladesh, China and in some parts of Thailand. It is a prized animal for the people of Northeast India in general and the state of Arunachal Pradesh in particular, where it is the state symbol; as due to its inherent socio-cultural and economic dynamism, it plays a multidimensional role in the tribal society. The Tagin tribe consider Mithun or *Subu* as the most valuable animal resource. It is regarded as a symbol of wealth, prestige and was customarily utilised as a medium of trade, exchange, a means to settle disputes and as bride price. It is also considered as a sacred animal and is sacrificed on important social ceremonies and occasions. Since ages, the Mithun has occupied a pivotal position in the Tagin society and its relationship with the tribe is corroborated by the rich Oral Traditions which suggest the value system bequeathed to them by their forefathers.

According to Tagin mythology and oral traditions, there are different versions of tales regarding the origin Mithun. However, it is generally considered that Mithun was created by *Ayu Donyi*, the supreme Sun Goddess through *Nite Ane*, a daughter of *Ayu Donyi* and was passed on to *Abutanyi*, whom the Tagin community consider as their earliest known ancestor. The following verses were recited by a priest (Nyibu) explaining the origin of Mithun:

*Nite Ane gv kamgv pyakum tolo sebv nyi garlin penkv*  
(Mithun (*Bos Frontalis*) are hatched at divine realm of Sun Goddess)

*Pyakum rook lo binyi nyi garlin penekv*  
(At lower region of the divine realm, humans were hatched)

*Pyakum gv rudum tolo sinyi nyi garlin penekv*  
(At upper region of the divine realm, Mithun were hatched)

*Binyi Sinyi nyi gartak laila,*  
(Taking both Human and Mithun together)

*Anyi ham Rwngo Mwbo Simvla*<sup>1</sup>  
(Allow them to cultivate together)

The priestly verses presented above form the conceptual foundation upon which the Tagin understanding of Mithun rests. While at first glance the chant appears to recount a simple act of divine creation, closer engagement with the imagery reveals a complex philosophical statement about relatedness, differentiation, and obligation. Priestly recitations concerning the emergence of Mithun reveal a cosmological imagination in which humans and Mithun originate within a shared field of being. Informants, most of them who were priests, repeatedly emphasise that creation unfolded in the sacred domain associated with *Nite Ane*. Interpretations differ slightly: some ritual experts identify her directly with *Ayu Donyi*, the supreme Sun Goddess, whereas others describe her as one of many daughters of *Ayu Donyi*. Yet such variation does not weaken the theological point. In either case, origin is located within an unquestionable sphere of divine authority of *Ayu Donyi*. The existence of Mithun is therefore not accidental, ecological, or merely historical; it is intentional and sacred.

At the centre of the verse stands the striking image of the *pyakum*, a type of rectangular plate/bowl carved out of wood used in olden days when modern utensils did not exist. The verse states that from this vessel both humans and Mithun came into existence, though from different positions upon it. Humans occupied the lower or southern side, while Mithun appeared at the upper or northern edge. The differentiation is thus expressed through orientation rather than substance. What changes is placement; what remains constant is source. This metaphor deserves careful attention. The *pyakum* cannot be read literally as utensil. Within ritual speech, experts frequently underline that because both beings arose from the same *pyakum*, they are bound by primordial relatedness. The vessel functions as more than material object; it is a metaphor of shared birth, comparable to a womb from which distinct yet connected lives unfold. By situating origin in a plate, a domestic utensil associated with eating together; the chant also evokes ideas of commensality and mutual dependence. To belong to the same plate is to belong to the same social universe.

At the same time, directional distinction introduces asymmetry. Upper and lower positions anticipate the subsequent differentiation of roles between human leadership and animal submission. Yet hierarchy emerges within relatedness rather than replacing it. The chant thus resolves a tension fundamental to Tagin social thought: how beings can be unequal yet remain relatives. Thus, Mithun is never imagined as alien life captured from outside nature. It is co-born relative, placed differently but emerging from the same sacred source.

Equally significant is the final instruction that humans and Mithun should cultivate together. Agriculture here signifies participation in ordered existence. To till side by side is to cooperate in sustaining the world. Through these elements the verse accomplishes several tasks simultaneously. It provides an origin account, establishes genealogical closeness, anticipates hierarchy, and authorizes future interaction. Rather than functioning merely as mythic background, the chant operates as a charter for institutional life. Understanding this cosmological premise is essential before turning to the narrative episodes of separation, promise, and adjudication that follow.

### **Separation, Transformation, and the Promise of Return: *Benyi* and *Senyi***

The cosmological proximity of shared origin becomes vivid in the widely narrated episode of *Benyi* and *Senyi*. Informants frequently present this episode as the moment when proximity gradually transformed into differentiated destinies, yet without dissolving kinship.

In the time when humans and future Mithun still inhabited a common social world and when distinctions between humans and animals had not yet hardened, two sisters *Benyi* (younger) and *Senyi* (elder), lived together in harmony. They sustained themselves through daily foraging and everyday they ventured into the forest to gather food and returned home at night. Their daily journeys into the forest were cooperative, and no boundary separated human discipline from other forms of life. Gradually, however, divergence became visible. *Benyi* began to observe that *Senyi* did not bring sufficient food from the forest and sometimes even returned empty handed. Suspicious, one day, she followed her and witnessed her consuming grasses and uncultivated growth, foods that did not conform to human discipline. When confronted, *Senyi* did not resist the accusation. Instead, she acknowledged that her orientation had shifted irrevocably. She confessed that she could no longer live according to human discipline and would instead remain in the forest like other creatures. Withdrawal into the forest was therefore accepted as the necessary consequence of altered nature. Yet the narrative does not present departure as rupture. Before leaving, *Senyi* addressed *Benyi* with affection and issued a solemn assurance that although she would inhabit the forest, she would not abandon her human relatives. She assured her that she would continue to participate in human affairs whenever called upon, particularly during marriage ceremonies. Following this promise, *Senyi* assumed the form of Mithun and began dwelling permanently in the forest, while *Benyi* continued the human lineage. Thus, what appears today as demand for bride price is understood as the fulfilment of *Senyi's* assurance to her sister.

#### **Brotherhood and Obligation: *Narbu* and *Subu***

A parallel narrative, widely known though told with minor local variations, expressed through masculine figures, reiterates the same structural logic. *Narbu* and *Subu* are said to have lived as brothers before differentiation took place. Changes in inclination gradually drew *Subu* toward the forest, where he too assumed the form of Mithun. *Narbu* remained within the human community, continuing the ancestral line. As in the earlier episode, transformation was accompanied by commitment. *Subu* declared that he would always respond when called upon for ritual or communal purposes. His future death in sacrificial contexts was thus anticipated as fulfilment of fraternal duty. By reproducing the theme through siblings of another gender, the tradition reinforces its universality. Mithun remains relative irrespective of narrative variant and gender.

#### **Adjudication and the Establishment of Order: The Episode of *Dorichijing***

While the narratives of *Benyi–Senyi* and *Narbu–Subu* explain separation and continuing obligation, the episode of *Dorichijing* addresses the establishment of hierarchy and the regulation of future conduct. The following verses were chanted by the Nyibu describing the whole episode of *Dorichijing*:

*Sinyi gv pipa upo he harkuma*  
(Mithun's rice beer not fermented)

*Sinyi gv pipa upo he paku kuro ku*  
(Mithun's rice beer became sour)

*Hekalabv Binyi gv kochii bv Sinyi kokii lo jukdu kubv*  
(Mithun to follow humans hereafter)

*Sinyi nyi ettv-takki motkula*  
(By smearing rice powder upon Mithun)

*Sinyi nyi nyime rwnv dokubv*  
(Mithun to be given as bride prize)

*Sinyi nyi Riar hilo, riab hilo ngaa, doji hilo,  
Bur hilo nga, jigri hilo, pumri hilo nga,  
Potv hila nga jeebv paadkubv*

(*Hilo* means benevolent diety; Mithun is to be sacrificed to appease different deities like *Bur hilo* (deity of sea), *Doji hilo* (deity of forest) etc.

*Sinyi nyi leppo bolo hikpo bolo hujung nihi,  
Rukung nije jelik dubv, Sinyi nyi padkubv*  
(Mithun has to be killed by neck with axe and Dao)

*Sinyi gv mombo bolo pukri jeluk dukbv*<sup>2</sup>  
(Shoot arrow at belly of Mithun)

The verses above recount that after transformation had taken place and Mithun began residing in the forest, uncertainty arose concerning precedence between humans (*Benyi*) and Mithun (*Senyi*). Although kinship persisted, the appropriate hierarchy of roles remained unsettled.

To prevent discord, *Dorichijing*, remembered in Tagin oral tradition as a figure of exceptional wisdom and mediator between different domains intervened. Rather than imposing judgment arbitrarily, he proposed a test grounded in productive capacity and discipline. Both parties were instructed to prepare *Opo*, a fermented rice wine/beer central to social and ritual life. The principle was simple yet symbolically profound: the brew that matured first would determine precedence. Fermentation, in this context, signified refinement, order, and control over time. According to the narrative, the *Opo* prepared by *Binyi* fermented within three days as it was made out of *Tamii* (Millet) and that of *Sinyi*, it took more than seven days to ferment as it was made out of *Pipa Tapi* (a kind of grass used for making brooms). Also, *Sinyi's Opo* turned out to be sour in taste. On the basis of this outcome, *Dorichijing* affirmed that humans would assume leadership within the social order. Importantly, the verdict was not contested. *Senyi* and her counterparts accepted the decision. Authority thus emerged not through domination but through adjudication recognised by both sides. The hierarchy established here did not negate shared origin; rather, it reorganised it into differentiated responsibility.

The episode does not end with the declaration of precedence. *Dorichijing* proceeded to define the terms under which Mithun would henceforth participate in human society. He laid down instructions concerning the proper method of tethering the animal during ceremonial occasions, the application of ritual substances such as *Ettv/Ettving Takii*, (Rice powder mixed with ginger and *Opo*) on Mithun's head, procedure for killing the Mithun during sacrifices either by shooting an arrow at its belly or striking at the neck with an axe or *Dao*, and the distribution of portions to designated divine deities etc.

Through this act of codification, ritual practice acquired cosmological legitimacy. Present-day procedures are thus understood not as human inventions but as continuation of directives established at the moment when order itself was defined. These instructions transform ritual killing into regulated procedure. Violence is not arbitrary; it is prescribed, measured, and sanctified through memory of *Dorichijing's* decree.

The *Dorichijing* episode therefore performs a crucial narrative function. It resolves potential rivalry, legitimises human authority, sanctifies sacrifice, and provides a template for correct conduct. If the metaphor of the *pyakum* establishes co-origin, and the sibling narratives explain separation with promise, *Dorichijing* institutionalises the relationship. Thus, Hierarchy becomes lawful, Sacrifice becomes sanctioned and memory becomes rule.

### From Narrative to Institution: Analytical Discussion

The narrative materials presented above do not function merely as symbolic explanations of origin. They continue to inform practical reasoning, moral judgement, and institutional behaviour within contemporary Tagin society. When the *Nyibu*, elders and experts invoke the stories of shared birth, sibling separation, and *Dorichijing's* arbitration, they are not recounting distant antiquity; they are activating principles that regulate present action. These traditions reveal how cosmology operates as jurisprudence, how kinship becomes regulatory principle, and how interspecies relations are embedded within structured hierarchy rather than unregulated coexistence.

The metaphor of the *pyakum* establishes a conceptual world in which humans and Mithun arise from a common generative source. The lower and upper positions on the same vessel introduce distinction without severing connection. This ontological framework challenges utilitarian readings of Mithun as merely livestock. Its significance cannot be reduced to pastoral economy, because its existence within human society is grounded in genealogical proximity rather than capture or conquest. Such an understanding shapes the ethical framework within which ownership, exchange, and ritual participation are interpreted.

The sibling narratives of *Benyi–Senyi* and *Narbu–Subu* elaborate how divergence produces distinct roles without extinguishing kinship. Transformation into forest-dwelling Mithun is framed as necessary realignment rather than exile. The pledge of continued responsiveness ensures that separation generates structured reciprocity rather than alienation. Here the verses chanted by Tagin *Nyibu* offers a nuanced perspective on hierarchy. Authority emerges not through conquest but through adjudicated recognition, as seen in the *Dorichijing* episode. The fermentation trial symbolically privileges agricultural discipline over wild growth, thereby grounding leadership in cultivated order. Yet acceptance of the verdict by *Senyi* preserves relational continuity and indicates that although humans assume leadership yet, Mithun occupies an indispensable position within the moral order.

Perhaps the most visible arena in which these narratives operate is marriage. External observers often describe the transfer of Mithun between families as bride wealth, implying economic valuation of women and equivalence between life and livestock. However, Tagin explanations reveal a different logic. Because *Senyi* pledged perpetual availability to her sister's descendants, the animal requested during negotiation is understood as a relative responding to ancestral obligation. In this sense, exchange is not market transaction but renewal of intimacy. The giving of Mithun acknowledges continuity between houses, affirms mutual respect, and demonstrates that kinship ties remain active. Quantity does communicate prestige, yet prestige here signifies capacity to honour inherited commitments rather than accumulation of impersonal capital. Thus the institution of marriage derives legitimacy from cosmological memory.

The *Dorichijing* episode further embeds ritual practice within sacred precedent. His judgement introduces asymmetry, placing humans in a guiding position. Yet the narratives insist that precedence emerged through mutually recognised trial. Mithun's acceptance of the verdict is crucial. Authority therefore does not cancel relatedness; it reorganises it. This helps explain why domination of the animal is rarely articulated in everyday discourse. Even when Mithun are owned, controlled, or sacrificed, the *Nyibu* frequently employ the language of request, invitation, or calling. For instance, in the ritual process of *Svlam Dwnam* during Si Donyi Hilo, the *Nyibu* before sacrificing the Mithun on the *Sogwng/Yugwng* (ritual altar), chants specific incantations requesting the soul of mithun to undergo correct and moral paths towards the abode of deities. In addition to this, ritual killing becomes intelligible within this framework. Since *Subu* and *Senyi* declared willingness to serve communal needs, ritual slaughter

becomes compliance with ancestral directive rather than spontaneous violence. Also, the specific instructions concerning ritual practices related to Mithun such as application of *Ettv Takii*, modes and methods of sacrifice legitimizes the present day customary practices.

Technical studies from the ICAR National Research Centre on Mithun and field-based research by several scholars highlight the semi-domesticated character of Mithun husbandry, including free-ranging patterns and collective management practices. When read alongside oral tradition, such arrangements appear less as pragmatic adaptations and more as reflections of cosmological logic. Because *Senyi* chose forest residence, complete enclosure would contradict foundational memory. At the same time, individual and clan ownership persists, demonstrating that autonomy and belonging coexist. This configuration aligns with Radhika Govindrajan's observation that animal relations in Himalayan societies often inhabit spaces between domestication and wildness, structured by affective and moral ties rather than simple economic utility. Thus management practices reproduce cosmological precedent.

Customary law among the Tagin tribe frequently employs Mithun as medium of compensation and reconciliation. The present analysis extends that insight by demonstrating how oral tradition itself provides the normative basis for such juridical practices. No written code formalises these principles. Instead, authority derives from remembered narrative. Myth becomes precedent and precedent becomes obligation. In this regard, Tagin oral tradition performs a function analogous to constitutional text, though transmitted through chant rather than inscription. The continuing centrality of Mithun in ceremonial and institutional contexts indicates that these narrative foundations remain active despite socio-economic transformation. Adaptations occur, yet legitimacy continues to draw upon remembered beginnings. In this sense, oral tradition does not simply preserve history, it generates governance.

Although the preceding discussion has emphasised the structural coherence of Mithun-related traditions, it is equally important to recognise that Tagin society is not static. Increasing monetisation, administrative regulation, educational mobility, and state-sponsored conservation initiatives have introduced new frameworks of valuation and management. Younger generations increasingly participate in wage labour and market exchange, while formal legal institutions coexist with customary dispute resolution mechanisms. Yet these transformations have not displaced the narrative foundations outlined above. Rather, they coexist with them. Informants frequently express that ceremonies conducted without Mithun feel incomplete, even when monetary substitutions are available. The symbolic presence of the animal continues to anchor legitimacy in marriage alliances, ritual observances, and reconciliation processes.

This persistence suggests that the authority of oral tradition does not depend upon resistance to change. Instead, it derives from its capacity to render social action meaningful. Even where adaptation occurs, reference to ancestral precedent remains necessary to confer moral validity. In this context, Mithun occupies a dual position: it is both material asset and narrative anchor. Its value cannot be explained solely through market equivalence, nor solely through ritual symbolism. It operates within a field where economy, cosmology, and governance intersect. The Tagin case thus demonstrates that oral traditions are not remnants of a pre-modern past. They remain active interpretive frameworks through which communities negotiate continuity amidst transformation.

## 5. Conclusion

The examination of Mithun-related traditions among the Tagin community demonstrates that oral knowledge in this context operates not as decorative folklore but as an organising principle of collective life. The chants, origin accounts, and adjudicatory episodes discussed above establish a coherent framework within which hierarchy, exchange, ritual procedure, and social recognition acquire

legitimacy. Through these inherited narratives, distinctions between human and animal existence are articulated in relational rather than oppositional terms, allowing differentiation without rupture. The image of shared emergence, followed by negotiated precedence, provides a durable explanatory model for why Mithun occupies a central place in matrimonial alliances, compensatory settlements, and sacrificial observances. What might externally appear as economic transaction or ceremonial display is locally interpreted as enactment of an inherited order. Authority does not rest solely on material control but on the ability to situate action within acknowledged ancestral precedent.

Equally significant is the way these traditions continue to shape contemporary practice despite expanding engagement with state institutions, market systems, and regulatory regimes. Adaptation is evident, yet foundational understandings remain operative. The endurance of Mithun within key social processes suggests that legitimacy flows from narrative continuity even when socio-economic conditions evolve. By centring Tagin interpretive categories, this study underscores the necessity of approaching indigenous societies on their own conceptual terms. It demonstrates that in settings where written codification is limited, normative systems may be sustained through performative transmission and ritual enactment. The case of Mithun among the Tagin tribe therefore contributes to broader discussions on how oral frameworks structure institutional life, mediate interspecies relations, and sustain collective order across generations. Moreover, while observing closely these recitations, one encounters not only stories of origin but a sustained philosophy of coexistence one in which obligation, authority, and value are anchored in remembered beginnings yet continually enacted in the present.

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### Notes

1. Interview with Shri Gogiam Gumja Tamin, aged about 65 years, priest of Leji Rijo village, Sign circle, Upper Subansiri district, Arunachal Pradesh, held scheduled interview on February 16, 2024 at Leji Rijo village. (Hereinafter referred to as GGTI, Gogiam Gumja Tamin Interview)
2. GGTI.

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