

Examining the Distinctive Role of the Atu Kojum (Kojum Welare Society) in Tagin Culture

Tai Gumja

PhD Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, Rajiv Gandhi University, Arunachal Pradesh.

ABSTRACT

The primary goal of this study is to shed light on the distinctive characteristics of the Kojum descendants within the Tagin tribe by bringing their unique social, cultural, and historical traits into the public sphere. These features not only set the Kojum subgroup apart but also elevate their significance and appeal within the broader Tagin community. This exceptional standing has long attracted scholars' and authors' focused attention, often prompting more intensive inquiry into the Kojum descendants than into the Tagin tribe at large. Motivated by a desire to address this scholarly curiosity and to discover new avenues for research, the present study seeks to explore previously unasked or under-explored questions about the Kojum lineage. By probing deeper into their traditions, identity, and social structures, this work aims to deliver a richer, more nuanced understanding. In doing so, it aspires to fill existing research gaps and provide clear, well-grounded insights into the Kojum descendants, ensuring that future inquiries are both informed and meaningful.

Keywords: Kojum descendants, Tagin, Uniqueness, and Query.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To explore and highlight the uniqueness of the Kojum Welfare Society, focusing on its distinctive cultural, social, or organizational characteristics.
- To examine the underlying reasons and factors that contribute to the formation and sustenance of the unique cult or identity associated with the society.

METHODOLOGY

The present study will employ two methodological approaches: the descriptive method and the analytical method. The descriptive method is used to present the collected data in the manner it was narrated, presented and observed during the fieldwork. On the other hand, the analytical method was applied to examine and verify the collected data through cross-referencing with existing literature, including books, articles, vlogs, and theses. This approach is intended to minimize inaccuracies and enhance the reliability of the study.

For data collection, both primary and secondary sources were utilized. Primary data was obtained through the unstructured interviews and field surveys conducted in the study area. Secondary data was gathered from the relevant books, academic articles, vlogs, and previously published theses.

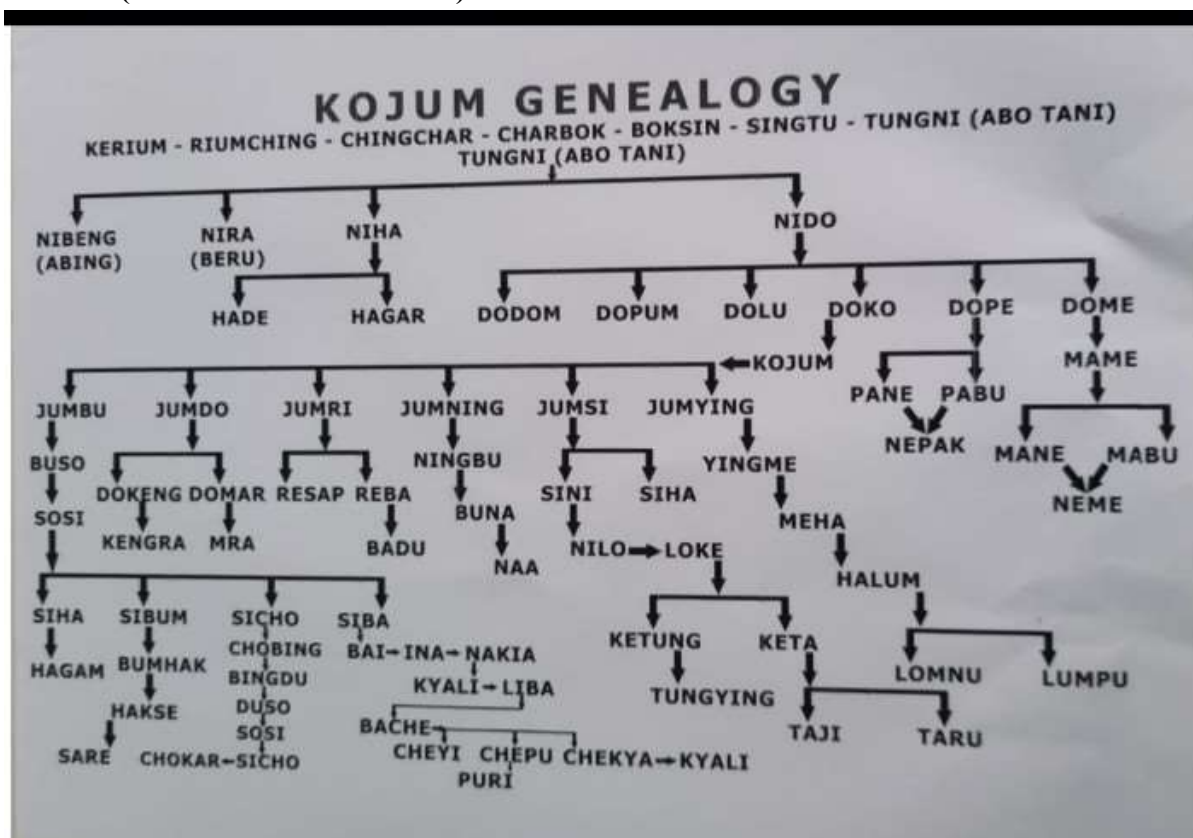
INTRODUCTION

The Tagin is, one of the major tribes in Arunachal Pradesh, believed to be descendants of the *Abutanyi* (also spelled *Abotanyi*) groups, along with other related groups such as the Nyishi, Galo, Apatani, Adi, and Mishng. Among the various clan-based organizations within the Tagin community, the Kojum Welfare Society (KWS) stands out as a registered clan-based organization under the umbrella of the Tagin Welfare Society (TWS), which serves as the apex body representing the Tagin people.

The Kojum Welfare Society comprises the collective of the clans and the sub-clans descended from *Atu* Kojum, a legendary historical forefather figure. The clans and sub-clans forming this society include Rebi, Chokar, Puri, Nilo, Kyali, Nah, Mra, Sare, Badu, among others. Traditionally, these clans have been identified and united under the name of *Atu* Kojum which was further strengthened during ritual chants by priests with recounting of the genealogies. Although the official formation of the Kojum Welfare Society occurred relatively recently in 2019, the collectiveness with *Atu* Kojum as a common ancestor has been passed down through generations since time immemorial.

The majority of the *Atu* Kojum group population resides within the Upper Subansiri district of Arunachal Pradesh. Consequently, the district headquarters, Daporijo, also serves as the headquarters of the Kojum Welfare Society. Within this district, the population is dispersed across several administrative circles, including Chetam, Giba, Taliha, Siyum, and Nacho. However, the largest concentration of the *Atu* Kojum people is found in the Limeking and Taksing circles of Upper Subansiri.

ABO TANYI (ABOTANYI LINEAGE) AND THE KOJUM SOCIETY



Source: **KOJUM WELFARE SOCIETY GENEALOGY** (provided by Chatung Mra, the President of Kojum Welfare Society, 2025).

With regard to the above context, one of the most distinctive and sometimes confusing aspects of the Kojum community lies in tracing their genealogy. There exists a widespread perception among many people, including scholars and even some members of the Tagin tribe, that the Kojum people are not direct descendants of *Abu Tanyi* (also referred to as *Abo Tanyi* or simply *Tani*). *Abu Tanyi* is traditionally recognized as the principal forefather of all the Tanyi tribes, which include the Tagin, Nyishi, Galo, Apatani, Adi, and Mishng communities of Arunachal Pradesh, according to Tanyi mythology and philosophical beliefs.

For the Tanyi tribes, the genealogy is a central aspect of identity and is traditionally traced back to *Abu Tanyi*, who is considered the progenitor of their collective ancestry. The system used for counting generations involves focusing on the last two or three syllables of the father's name or suffix. This suffix-based naming convention allows each generation to be linked to the previous one, thereby maintaining a clear lineage record. For example, if a father's name ends with certain syllables, the child's name incorporates or is related to those syllables, making it easier to identify generational progression within the clan. This could be more comprehensively illustrated in the following genealogical circulation: from *Mra Pushing* (the traditional orthography would have been *Pusang*) then *Mra Sange*, *Mra Gei*, *Mra Emi*, *Mra Medie* (*Tedie Mra*) (the prefix "Te/Ta" is added before the name to denote the masculine gender in the Tanyi nomenclature).

This method of recounting genealogy not only helps in tracing ancestry but also plays a significant role in social organization, inheritance rights, and ritual practices within the community. It is deeply embedded in the oral traditions and cultural heritage of the *Tanyi* tribes and serves as a fundamental marker of belonging and identity.

However, the Kojum community's association with *Abu Tanyi* is often debated because their genealogy, though linked to *Atu Kojum* as a legendary ancestor, does not always neatly align with the broader genealogy system traced from *Abu Tanyi*. This creates a unique cultural and genealogical identity that sets the Kojum apart from other *Tanyi* clans, adding complexity to their historical and mythological origins.

The confusion or misnomer surrounding the Kojum genealogy largely stems from the similarity in nomenclature. When examining their lineage, it is important to note that the Kojum also trace their ancestry starting from *Kerium Kulu* (which is also referred as *Korium Kulu*) which refers to the creation of the universe according to the *Tanyi* belief system. From this point, the genealogy continues through *Tungni* or *Tungnyi* (another name for *Abo Tanyi* or *Tanyi*), followed by *Nido* (also spelled *Nyido*).

But many people including scholars, writers, and even some Tagin community members often misunderstand or misinterpret the term *Nido* (*Nyido*). When narrating genealogy, those who lack sufficient knowledge or inadvertently overlook the context tend to associate *Nido* with the word for "Rain" in the *Tanyi* dialect. This misunderstanding arises because the same word, *Nido*, is used in the local dialect for the name of one of the ancestors of the Kojum people. This word is a homophone of the word "*Nido*" which is the term for the natural phenomenon of rain.

It is crucial to clarify in this context that the term "*Nido*" referred in the genealogical recounting, especially within the Kojum Welfare Society (KWS), is not the personification of "Rain" as a human ancestor of the said people but rather the name of one of the significant descendants of *Abo Tanyi*. This distinction is essential to avoid confusion and to accurately understand the lineage and ancestral heritage of the Kojum clans. Thus, the misnomer is primarily a linguistic gap, which has caused some confusion in the oral and written narratives about their genealogy.

The confusion regarding the genealogy of the Kojum clans can be traced back to the 1950s, when during an anthropological expedition by Geeta Krishnatry and her team, which included her husband and scouts, for the exploration of the undivided Subansiri belt stretching from Ziro to the Limeking area as part of an administrative survey in what is now the Upper Subansiri district. In her tour diary, she mentioned that the Mra and Nilo (Nyilo) clans belonged to the ancestors of *Nyido* (Rain) (a homophone of the name of the ancestor), and further generalized that all Tagin people from the Nacho area belonged to this same lineage, due to faulty translation of the word in its cultural context. This led to the wrong perception that these people are the descendants of the “Rain”.

However, when examined in the current context, the Tagin people residing beyond the Nacho region primarily include clans such as Puri, Nilo, Kyali, Nah, Mra, Sare, and others. The suggestion that all these clans descend from the “Rain” lineage is fundamentally incorrect. This error likely arose due to a language barrier during the expedition, leading to mistranslation. Geeta Krishnatry relied on interpreters namely Nguri Tem and Tato Riba neither of whom were as political interpreters trained for the translation and understanding the context of the Tagin language. This may (and, indeed, it has) have caused miscommunication, leading her to record the genealogy inaccurately based on the information conveyed by these two interpreters.

Subsequently, L. R. Sailo also wrote that the Mra clan descended from *Nyido* (Rain). Since Sailo’s account was based on narrations from Mra Chabe (Chabe Mra), this too appears to have been affected by a language obstacle. Sailo, being primarily an administrator and not an anthropologist, coming from Mizoram, may not have fully grasped the nuances of the Tagin dialect or cultural context, which contributed to the perpetuation of this misunderstanding.

Since then, this misconception has been perpetuated by several subsequent writers and scholars, even by those from the Tagin community. A notable example is Dr. Ashan Riddi, a respected Tagin scholar and author. However, he too repeated the same error as his predecessors. In his book, “*The Tagins of Arunachal Pradesh*”, he wrote that the Nah and Mra clans claimed descent from *Nyido* (Rain). When I asked him personally about the source of this information, he admitted that he had relied on earlier written accounts without independently verifying the genealogy.

Therefore, it may be concluded that the primary cause of these repeated errors and misconceptions regarding the Kojum genealogy is initially rooted in language barriers during early ethnographic work. This was subsequently compounded by the uncritical acceptance and reproduction of those initial mistakes by later writers, often due to a lack of thorough investigation or unintentional oversight.

TIBET RELATIONS

Due to their location along the Himalayan frontier, the Tagin community especially the descendants of the Kojum lineage have long maintained deep cultural and social ties with Tibet. Nestled along the Subansiri River near Nacho and stretching toward Taksing Circle (one of the last administrative units in Upper Subansiri district), the Kojum clan has been situated at a geographical crossroads between India and Tibet. This proximity fostered frequent exchanges: trade, intermarriage, and shared cultural practices, which over centuries shaped a distinct hybrid identity.

Geeta Krishnatry’s travel diary recounts her observations from the region near Nacho, noting how Tibetan influence visibly permeated the local dress. Beyond attire, the relationship was deeply personal and familial. Kojum Tagins referred to Tibetans as “*Nyimv Nyi*” and considered them “our (their) family” revealing an affectionate bond that went beyond commerce and towards kinship. Shared rituals, reciprocal

hospitality, and pilgrimage circuits like the Tsari-Rong-Khor (a Tibetan circumambulation festival held every twelfth year) further knitted these communities.

In sum, Kojum Tagins' alignment with Tibet wasn't merely political; it was rooted in lived everyday connections. With dress, language, religious observances, and familial bonds all displaying Tibetan influence, the Kojum lineage stood as a tangible testament to the interwoven history of Arunachal's high-altitude frontier and its Tibetan neighbour.

By virtue of their geographical proximity and control of the key mountain passes, the Kojum Tagins effectively monopolized the barter trade with Tibet. Situated along the ancient *Nyimv Geeko* (Tibetan route) which ran through Nacho and Taksing Circle. This corridor served as their essential economic lifeline. Through this route, Kojum Tagins accessed a wide array of Tibetan goods and ensured a steady flow of resources into their communities. Their relative abundance in trade goods allowed them to procure both everyday supplies and luxury items, including: local ornaments, *Kopu/Kopung* (bangles), *Tasing* (beaded necklaces), *Talu* (lightweight aluminium plate jewellery), *Jungrung* (earrings), *Riokse* (swords) etc, local clothing such as *Jvtv lwlik* (knee-length red cloth), *Jvtv* (general-purpose long cloth), *Gunang* (light, knee-length garment), *Namu* (woollen cloth), Traditional footwear and belt (*Tayin*) etc, other commodities such as, salt, yak, horse etc.

This trade network extended beyond local barter. It connected the Kojum Tagins with trans-Himalayan markets, enabling the exchange of metal goods, textiles, livestock, and foodstuffs in return for Tibetan staples such as salt, wool, and barley-related products. The route's role as a commercial artery made it indispensable and underscored the Tagins' strategic economic position. In essence, the Kojum Tagins weren't merely passive recipients of Tibetan trade; they actively dominated it, leveraging geography, social ties, and navigation skills to ensure a robust, self-sufficient, and culturally intertwined economy. Their material culture from jewellery and clothing to livestock and grains, bore testament to this sustained cross-border engagement.

The Kojum Tagins held a privileged position in the Migyitun region, located within Tibet's Tsari area, which also encompasses sacred sites tied to their ancestral clans of Nah and Mra. Invited by Tibetan authorities, the Kojums oversaw taxation and ensured safe passage for pilgrims, a recognition of their local sovereignty and cultural responsibility. During the famed Tsari pilgrimage cycle comprised of an annual *Kingkor* (week-long) and a grander *Ringkor* performed every 12 years, Tibetans sought the Kojums' approval to traverse their territories. At Migyitun, the Tibetan government accorded greetings and presented taxes "in kind" rather than monetary form.

The Kojums received these offerings as tribute and logistical payments, including:

- **Clothing & textiles:** woolen garments, traditional robes
- **Ornaments:** jewellery and metalware
- **Livestock:** horses (*siki*), yaks (*siyak*), sheep (*svya*), and pala (female cattle)
- **Tools & equipment:** mills and even firearms (*gun/mobuk*)

This kind of taxation underlines their command over the pilgrimage corridor even Tibetan officials recognized Kojum authority by delivering taxes directly to them.

In exchange, the Kojums facilitated the pilgrimage, ensuring safe and orderly transit. They deployed guides, opened staging huts, and maintained the track roles hardly distinct from modern administrative authorities. Through this dual function tax collectors *and* pilgrimage custodians, the Kojums emerged as both commercial and political brokers, masterful in trade, diplomacy, and cross-border governance. Their status even earned recognition as the de facto "owners" of the routes and adjacent villages.

In short, through in-kind taxation and pilgrimage administration, the Kojum Tagins consolidated economic prosperity, cultural prestige, and political influence cementing their role as the principal intermediaries between Tibetan authorities and the Tagin hinterlands.

PIONEERS IN SOCIO-CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS FIELD.

Particularly among the Kojum lineage and the Tagin as a broader community, the Nah clan likely emerged as pioneers in integrating water-powered mill machinery for producing ghee, butter, and barley powder. In an era, when mechanized processing was virtually unknown in the region, the adoption of water mills represented a remarkable leap in both technology and economic potential. This early adoption of mechanized food processing marks the Nahs as one of the key harbingers of technological and economic development within Tagin society. By introducing functional innovations like the water mill, the Nah not only improved local livelihoods but also consolidated Kojum leadership in trade and cultural progress.

In the religious field, the Nahs might have been the first among the Kojum and the Tagin as a whole to convert to an alien religion, namely Buddhism. This transformation occurred due to consistent interaction and meetings with Tibet through trade relations, which influenced them to adopt Tibetan religious beliefs. Since then, this religious impact can still be observed among the Nah. Because of this conversion, we can now proudly say that the Tagin have dual religions: Siju and Si-Donyi. Siju represents the Buddhist belief among the Tagin, while Si-Donyi is practiced by the general Tagin population. This dual religious identity was even officially recognized by the Government of Arunachal Pradesh through the Department of Indigenous Affairs in 2024. This uniqueness was introduced into the Tagin community by the Nah of the Kojum descendant.

Moreover, during the early days, when Si Donyi was officially inaugurated as the sole festival of the Tagin community, the prominent figures such as Taser Mra and Gyaju Chader, who were among the founding members of the Si Donyi Festival House's Discussion played key roles. Further, due to the influence of the Nahs and the Tibetans on each other, a unique coexistence of dual religious figures, the local priest (*Nyibv* or *Nyibu*) and the lama, can be observed during the Siju festival. This distinct celebration is notable because, unlike usual festivals where a particular religious representative leads, here both religious roles play a significant part.

In the realm of social life, Puri Taring's marriage to a Tibetan woman signifies a notable instance of intermarriage between the Tagin and Tibetan communities. This union suggests that Puri Taring may have been among the early individuals from the Tagin society to establish such a matrimonial alliance. Additionally, the relationship between Pushing Mra and Sasra Taji, though illicit, further indicates that inter-community relationships were not uncommon. These instances imply that there were likely other individuals within the Kojum society who married Tibetan women, though their stories may not have been documented or have remained unknown.

In social practices, the Nah and Mra clans of the Tagin community exhibited distinctive customs compared to other Tagin groups. Notably, the Nah clan practiced a form of slavery, a cultural trait probably not observed among other Tagins. Additionally, their burial rituals were unique. Upon death, the body was fully covered with cloth, and the salt was placed inside the coffin or wooden box to prevent odor and early decomposition. The deceased was then placed within a rectangular stone pillar structure, surrounded by stones. This practice stemmed from the belief that burying the body in cultivated earth would pollute its sanctity, potentially causing disease if consumed by the living. Such customs are still believed to persist among the Nah clan members who have not converted to Christianity.

The Nah and Mra clans are believed to have been among the first in the Tagin community to possess firearms or guns (*mobuk*), a practice distinct from other Tagin groups. These guns were likely acquired through barter trade with Tibet or as part of the tribute system during pilgrimage circumambulations in Nah and Mra territories. Such armament not only served practical purposes but also symbolized their strategic importance and autonomy in the region.

CONTINUATION OF TRADITIONAL POLITICAL SYSTEM

While the system of the political interpreters (P.I) or *kotokis* might have died elsewhere in Arunachal Pradesh, the lands of the Kojum society is its last vestige. The Kojum society, especially in the Mra and Nah people, still have retained the post of the P.I.s. The said posts are currently hold by Takia Bai (the Nah) and Yapung Mra (the Mra), who are the last of the post holders, giving them a unique distinction.

PIONEERING IN WORDS.

Today, many words commonly used among the Tagin such as *komla* (apple), *jaa* (potato), *jakok* (onion), *svya* (sheep), *siki* (horse), *siyak* (yak), and *pala* (traditional “ice cow” or *dzong*, a hybrid of yak and cow) could trace their origins to the Kojum descendants, who first encountered or sourced these items in their area. Over time, these terms became fully integrated into Tagin vocabulary (*gaamchar*), largely through official adoption by the Tagin Cultural Society (TCS). Under the leadership of Secretary General Lardik Kare and President Tabu Paktung, the TCS formally recognized these lexical borrowings as part of the standardized Tagin language. This initiative further enriched and strengthened Tagin vocabulary, affirming these Kojum-origin words as essential elements of cultural heritage and everyday speech.

CONCLUSION

It is now clear that the earliest waves of globalization from Tibet flourished strongly among the Kojum lineage. As the forerunners in many domains viz technology, trade, language, religious practice, and governance, they introduced advancements that later spread across broader Tagin society. These pioneering advancements made significant and lasting contributions to the Tagin cultural and social landscape. It is a privilege to recognize such a rich cultural history among the Tagin however, some of these traditions, particularly those of the Nah, now verge of extinction. Because of these remarkable yet fading traditions which has not been given their due recognition as the greater part of the integral Tagin, at times, an urge for a separate identity may seem to emerge, stemming from limited awareness of the Kojum society’s unique contributions and heritage within the broader Tagin community.

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