



The Ancestral Roots And Migration Of The Sajolang (Miji) Tribe Of Arunachal Pradesh: A Detailed Analysis.

¹Mr. Hundu Miji,

Guest faculty, Department of Political Science

Govt. College Seppa.

²Ms. Lishi Yana,

Guest faculty, Department of Economics

Govt. College Seppa.

³Dr. Apo Bagang

Independent Research Scholar.

Abstract:

The Sajolang tribe, predominantly inhabiting the West and East Kameng districts of Arunachal Pradesh, possesses a rich and complex and history regarding their origins. Historically known by the exonym “Miji”, the tribe has reclaimed the Sajolang to reflect their indigenous identity. Their history is a sophisticated blend of cosmological myths and documented Tibeto-Burman migratory patterns. This paper explores the ‘*Bor-Nyibo*’ primordial split, the linguistic diversions of the ‘*Dhammai*’ people, and the specific historical settlement patterns in the Sub-Himalayan tracts.

Introduction

The Sajolang tribe popularly known as the Miji are one of the major tribes of Arunachal Pradesh inhabits a large geographical area stretching from East Kameng district to West Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh. This tribe is a lesser-known tribe of the state. According to L. N. Chackravarty, the first mention of this tribe was cited in the British Administrative Report of 1882-83 where they were mentioned as a tribe living north of the Akas, (Chakravarty,1973, p.13), followed by Mckenzie in his book the North-East Frontier of Bengal (1884) where they were mentioned as a fierce and cognate race in the

interior region of the state. The mentions of the tribe in historical accounts are very limited. The Sajolang tribe occupies two adjacent Administrative Circle in the two District i.e. Nafra administrative circle in West Kameng and Lada in East Kameng. The tribe is surrounded by the different tribes at different directions; they neighbour Nyishi to the Eastern side, Aka tribe to the South, Buguns and Sherdukpen to the West and Monpa tribes to the North. Due to this close proximity with neighbouring tribes, various mention about the tribe can found in Oral tradition of their Neighbouring Tribes, for instance, the Nyishis refer the Sajolangs as Bangro and one of their myths claims that the Sajolangs are the descendent of *Robbhu Pacha* who was the younger brother of *Nyikum Niya* (forefather of the Nyishis according to Nyishi mythology), but not many Sajolangs acknowledges this myth neither do they endorse the claim. It is also noted that, the Aka tribe are also very similar to the Sajolang tribe and shares almost identical cultural life, it is also interesting to note that the nomenclature of their earlier name, the Miji was given to them by the Akas, which literally translates to fire giver. According to Johny Miji, (the President of Sajolang Elite Society) the legend behind the Miji nomenclature goes to the time of Tyagi Raja of the Akas when frequent raid on the British territories were carried out by him and he was supported by the Sajolangs; during this interaction it happen that some Aka men describe the Sajolangs as Miji (*Mi* = fire and *Ji* = to give) and the Colonial officials thus recorded them with the same name in their reports and memoirs (Sangdo, et al, 2025, p. 53-62). And interestingly the word Miji to these days is used, but the intellects of the tribe these days prefer to be called Sajolang instead. However, they refer themselves as *Dhammai* or *Nimmai* (The traditional name of the tribesmen in their local dialect). *Dhammai* is used by Sajolangs of Nafra area while its slightly different pronunciation *Nimmai* is used by the Lada folks. The term Miji was recently changed to Sajolang for all official purpose by the Government of India by an amendment act of the Indian Constitution on May 21st 2021.

Sajolang is an indigenous term used to unify the various sub clans (*'Dhammai'*, *'Nimmai'*, *'Khomai'*) under a single linguistic and cultural umbrella. In 2021, this was formally recognized by the Govt. of Arunachal Pradesh, marking a new chapter in their historical narratives.

Mythological Foundation: The Primordial Beginnings

Shuzanghu and Zanghmu

According to Sajolang mythology, the universe began not with a bang, but with two supreme, self-existent deities: *Shuzanghu* (the earth/ female principles) and *Zangmu*(the sky/male principle).

In the beginning, these two were united, and there was no space for life to breathe. Their eventual separation- often depicted as a cosmic necessity-created the world.

- The marriage of elements: Their union produced the first elements of nature: The Sun, the moon, and the various spirits (*Khu*) that inhabits the mountain and river.
- The creation of Man: Humans were not created in a vacuum but were born from the interactions of this divine forces. The Sajolang believed they are the decedents of these celestial beings, which instills deep sense of responsibility toward the environment.

The Concept of the “Middle World”

The Sajolang world view divides existence into three distinct realms:

1. The upper realm: The domain of the supreme deities and the celestial bodies.
2. The middle realm (The Earth): Where humans, animals, and terrestrial spirits reside.
3. The lower realm: Often associated with the roots of the earth and sub-terrain spirits.

Maintaining balance between these three realms is the core purpose of Sajolang rituals. When a human violates a taboo or disrespects a mountain spirit, "the middle world" falls out of sync, requiring a priest (*Gibi*) to intercede.

The Role of Nature and Animism

The foundation of the tribe is rooted in animism. They believed that every prominent natural feature- a massive rock, a deep gorge, or a sanctuaries-old tree-possesses a soul or a presiding deity.

Key Mythological Entities

Entity	Role/Description
<i>Phu</i>	The spirits of the high mountains who protect the tribe's territory.
<i>Jang-Lang-Nui</i>	The supreme spirit often invoked during major festival like Chingdang.
The Sun and the Moon	Viewed as the eyes of the creator, watching over the moral conduct of the tribe.

Chingdang: The mythological celebration

The Chingdang festival is the most significant manifestation of their mythological foundation. It is a post-harvest festival celebration that re-enacts the tribe's gratitude to the Earth.

- Offerings: They often sacrifice to the mountains and the rivers to thank them for protection and to appease any spirits that might have been offended during the farming cycle.
- Community identity: The festival serves as a “Myth in Motion”, where oral histories are chanted, reminding the younger generations of their divine lineage and the laws set by their ancestors.

The Sajolang origin story is deeply rooted in the *Bor-Nyibo* myth, which provides a genealogical map connecting them to the border tribal families of North East India.

The Legend of *Bor (Robo)*

Sajolang oral traditions, preserved by the '*Phulow-priest*' in sacred chants, traces their lineage to a primordial ancestor named bor. According to the myth;

- the brotherhood: Bor was the elder brother while *Nyobo* (Abotani) was the younger brother. They lived together in a mythological primordial land before a great disagreement or a divine mandate led to their separation.
- The divergence: *Nyibo* migrated towards the central belts of Arunachal Pradesh, becoming the ancestor of the Tani groups (Nyishi, Adi, Apatani, Galo, Tagin). Bor migrated towards the western and northern highlands, becoming the progenitor of the Sajolang (*Dhammai*).
- The gift of fire (Miji): The term "Miji" is an external designation given by the Akas, derived from *Mi* (Fire) and *Ji* (Giver). Legends suggest that during a period of great darkness or migration, the ancestors of the Sajolang were the keepers of the "external flame", which they shared with the others tribes, establishing their status as a "fire-giving people". They also suggest that during a period of great darkness or migration, the ancestors of the Sajolang were the keepers of the "external flame", which they shared with the other tribes, establishing their status as a "fire giving people".

1) Ethno-linguistic lineage and classification

Linguistically, the Sajolang occupy a unique and debated position that sheds light on their migratory isolations.

1.1 Linguistic divergence:

The Sajolang language, often referred to as *Dhammai*, belongs to the Tibeto-Burman family. However, unlike the Tani languages which show high degrees of mutual intelligibility, Sajolang is a part of a distinct "Kamengic" or "Hrusso-Sajolang" clustered. This suggests that Sajolang ancestors breached off from the main Tibeto-Burman migratory stream much earlier than the Tani groups, allowing for a unique linguistic evolution.

1.2 Physical anthropology:

Physically, the Sajolang exhibit Paleo-mongoloid characteristics consistent with population from the Eastern Himalayan and south east Asian corridors. Their historical migration routes suggest that they entered the Kameng region through the high altitude passes of the north, moving along the river valleys of the 'Bichom' and 'Tenga'.

2) Historical Migration: The journey from 'Lhunkhun'

The Sajolng migration was not a single event but a multi-generational movement of clans seeking arable land, water sources, and security.

- 2.1 The Northern Origins (*Lunkhun*): The 'Nu-chun' (Oral history chants) mentions a place called *Lunkhun* (or *Lhumkhum*) as their ancestral homeland. While its exact geographic location is debated, scholars believed it refers to the higher altitudes of the Eastern Himalaya or the Tibetan plateau.
- 2.2 The Descent: From *Lunkhun*, the clans moved southwards. They are believed to have stayed for several generations in a place called 'Pungzung', where they developed many of their agricultural techniques and social laws.
- 2.3 The entry into Kameng: The clans eventually crossed the high mountain ridge to enter the valleys of the Bichom rivers. They initially settled in the higher reaches of what is now the 'Nafra' and the 'Lada' Circles.
- 2.4 Clan based settlement patterns: The migration was led by clan leaders who established autonomous village units. Clans like the 'Khomai' and 'Nimmai' settled in the Nafra region and other branches pushed further east into the rugged terrains of East Kameng (Lada) adapting to even steeper landscapes.

3) Socio-Political interactions during migrations

The journey of the Sajolng was defined by their interactions with neighboring groups, which shaped their social structure.

- 3.1 The middlemen role: Historically, the Sajolng maintained complex relationship with the Buddhist Monpas to the West and the Tibetans to the North. Since they controlled the river valleys, that acted as the "middlemen" in the ancient Trans-Himalayan trade routes.
- 3.2 Barter trade: They traded forest produced, indigenous dye and medicinal herbs for Tibetan salt, wool and brass utensils. The tribe did not produce many economically valuable items of their own for the barter trade and as such, they were more of a middleman between the neighbours. Trading use to be the one of the most important features of the traditional Sajolng livelihood as it was the main source of their clothing and other necessities including metals and live stocks. So, from the accounts of Gazetteer of India (1996) we come to know that the tribe did not visit the plains (Choudhury, 1995, p.36), but also from the oral testimonies know that the plains of Assam were the ultimate destination of their metal source; the tribe men of the community procure those metal needs from their neighbouring tribe of the Sherdukpens and the Akas via barter, also they were themselves a middleman between the tribe and the raw sources from plains.
- 3.3 Cultural synthesis: This interaction introduced the Sajolng to certain material goods and decorative styles (such as specific beads and brass plates) that became essential to their bride price rituals and social status.

3.4 Territorial Consolidation: The Sajolang were known as a formidable warrior tribe. Their migration into the Bichom valley required them to defend their territory against encroachment. This led to the development of fortified village structures and a strong reliance on the *Melley* (village council) to maintain internal unity during periods of external pressure.

3.5 The transition to the modern identity: For decades, the community was officially recorded as “Miji”. However, the quest for a name that truly reflected their self-identity led to the adoption of “Sajolang”.

Conclusion:

The narrative of the Sajolang (Miji) is one of the profound cultural resilience- a journey from the mythical peaks of the eastern Himalayas to a modern era of formal self-assertion. Their story is not just one of migration, but of a transition from being defined by others to defining themselves.

The roots of the Sajolang are anchored in the Tibeto-Burman lineage, part of the broader migration patterns that populated the rugged terrains of Arunachal Pradesh. Unlike tribes with a singular exodus story, the Sajolang’s journey is preserved in oral chants that trace their movement through the high-altitude passes of West and East Kameng. Their ancestral identity was forged through a symbiotic, yet distinct, relationship with their neighbors. For centuries, they were the “fire-givers” to the Aka and the Nyishis. This highlights an ancestral journey characterized by inter-tribal diplomacy and trade, where they served as a vital link in the ancient Himalayan socio-economic network. They managed to remain a distinct entity, neither fully merging with the Buddhist Monpas to the west nor the Nyishis to the East, curving out a unique cultural niche centered around the Nafra and Lada regions.

The most significant milestone in their modern history is the formal transition from Miji to Sajolang. For decades, the tribe was officially recognized by a name given to them by others. The movement to adopt Sajolang as their constitutional identity was a powerful act of cultural reclamation.

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