



# Historical Origin of *Gwngrii Talwng*: Violence and Fratricide in Tagin Oral Traditions

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## Abstract

The concept of *Gwngrii Talwng* among the Tagin tribe of Arunachal Pradesh represents a culturally embedded understanding of lethal conflict encompassing acts of murder, fratricide, and spiritually mediated violence. Based on oral narratives and ethnographic field engagement in Upper Subansiri district of Arunachal Pradesh, the paper analyses the account of the brothers *Nyisu* and *Nyinyu*, recognised in community memory as the earliest instance of lethal conflict. Interpreted as an etiological narrative, the story links violence to kinship rupture, promise violation, transformation, and reciprocal death, thereby offering a culturally grounded explanation for the emergence of killing among humans. The analysis further demonstrates that *Gwngrii Talwng* encompasses the perceived influence of *Riaram Uyu*, malevolent spiritual entities associated with murder and misfortune, necessitating ritual intervention by *Nyibus* through rituals related to *Riaram Uyu*. The continued recitation of the narrative in ritual contexts underscores the enduring relationship between oral tradition, moral reasoning, and ceremonial practice within Tagin society.

**Keywords:** *Gwngrii Talwng*, Tagin tribe, Oral tradition, Ritual practice, Fratricide.

## 1. Introduction

Violence and its moral interpretation have occupied a central place in human societies, often articulated through narratives that link individual actions to broader cosmological and social processes. In many indigenous contexts, oral traditions serve as primary repositories of such interpretive frameworks, offering historically grounded explanations for the emergence of moral transgressions and their consequences. Among the Tagin tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, oral narratives constitute a vital medium through which collective memory, social norms, and cosmological understandings are transmitted across generations. These narratives not only recount events of the mythic past but also function as explanatory devices that illuminate the origins of social institutions, ritual practices, and moral categories.

One such concept is *Gwngrii Talwng*, a term that encompasses acts of murder, fratricide, and lethal transgression within Tagin society. The concept extends beyond the boundaries of juridical classification to embody a culturally embedded understanding of violence as a rupture affecting kinship relations, community cohesion, and spiritual equilibrium. Customary practices associated with *Gwngrii Talwng*; including social taboos, ritual purification, and mechanisms of retaliation, reflect its perceived gravity and the collective efforts undertaken to manage its consequences. Despite the significance of these practices, scholarly engagement with *Gwngrii Talwng* has largely remained confined to descriptive accounts of customary law and social regulation, leaving its indigenous historical and cosmological foundations insufficiently explored.

Tagin oral tradition offers a compelling entry point into this gap through narratives that trace the primordial emergence of lethal violence. Central among these is the account of two brothers whose relationship evolves from intimate cooperation to secrecy, transformation, and eventual fratricide. Within community understanding, this narrative represents the foundational moment through which *Gwngrii Talwng* entered the

human world, establishing a precedent that continues to inform moral reasoning and ritual response. The enduring relevance of this narrative is evident in its ritual deployment: during incidents of murder or intra-familial killing, *Nyibus* (priests) chant the story as part of ceremonial processes aimed at invoking and appeasing spiritual forces believed to influence violent acts. In this manner, the narrative operates simultaneously as historical memory, moral charter, and ritual instrument.

This paper examines the historical origins of *Gwngrii Talwng* through an analysis of Tagin oral tradition, situating the fratricide narrative within broader frameworks of indigenous historiography and cosmological interpretation. By foregrounding oral narratives as sources of historical knowledge, the study seeks to illuminate how the Tagin community conceptualise the emergence of violence, the disruption of kinship, and the necessity of ritual mediation. Through this approach, the study contributes to expanding scholarly understanding of how indigenous societies historicize violence and integrate such histories into contemporary systems of social and spiritual regulation.

## 2. Objectives of the Study

- 1) To document the Tagin oral narrative explaining the origin of *Gwngrii Talwng*.
- 2) To analyse the fratricide narrative as an etiological account of the emergence of lethal violence in Tagin historical consciousness.
- 3) To examine the moral and cosmological interpretations associated with *Gwngrii Talwng* within Tagin worldview.
- 4) To explore the ritual significance of this narrative in contemporary Tagin society, particularly its recitation during murder-related ceremonies.

## 3. Methodology

The present study adopts an ethnohistorical approach to examine the historical origins of *Gwngrii Talwng* within Tagin society through the analysis of oral tradition. In the absence of written historical records, the methodological framework combines narrative analysis with ethnographic insights derived from an extensive fieldwork in the Upper Subansiri district of Arunachal Pradesh.

The study primarily relies on data derived from oral narratives and community-based accounts preserved within Tagin cultural memory. Data generation involved the use of structured and unstructured interviews with knowledgeable informants, including village elders and *Nyibus*, alongside questionnaire-based interactions that facilitated documentation of narrative variations and interpretive perspectives. Both scheduled and unscheduled modes of engagement were employed to allow flexibility in capturing experiential knowledge and contextual explanations. Participant and non-participant observation further enabled familiarity with ritual contexts and the ways in which narratives are embedded within ceremonial practice. Visual documentation in the form of photographs and recordings supported the preservation of contextual information and served as supplementary reference material.

Secondary data were obtained through consultation of published and unpublished materials, including books, journal articles, theses, and community-based textual compilations available in institutional repositories and libraries. Given the relative paucity of written scholarship addressing the origins of indigenous priesthood and related cosmological narratives, these sources were used primarily to contextualise oral accounts rather than to substitute them.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

### 4.1 Conceptualising *Gwngrii Talwng* in Tagin Worldview

Among the Tagin community, *Gwngrii Talwng* refers to incidents involving the taking of human life, whether intentional or accidental, and is recognised as a condition carrying profound social and spiritual implications. Community interpretations emphasise that such events extend beyond the immediate act itself, generating far-reaching consequences that affect familial relationships, collective stability, and interactions with the unseen realm. As a result, *Gwngrii Talwng* is understood less as an isolated occurrence and more as a state of disruption that permeates multiple spheres of social existence.

Customary understandings portray *Gwngrii Talwng* as one of the gravest forms of transgression, particularly when violence occurs within kinship networks. The killing of a family member or clan affiliate is perceived as an extreme violation of relational obligations that underpin Tagin social organisation. Such acts historically gave rise to cycles of revenge between families, clans, and villages, reflecting the collective nature of responsibility and retribution within customary frameworks. The belief that the soul of the deceased may not attain peaceful rest until retaliation is achieved further underscores the relational dimension of violence and its enduring implications for community stability.

Beyond its reference to acts of killing, *Gwngrii Talwng* is also interpreted within Tagin understanding as encompassing the spiritual potency believed to precipitate such events. Community explanations frequently associate incidents of murder and severe accidents with the influence of *Riaram Uyu*, malevolent entities regarded as capable of disturbing human consciousness and instigating harmful actions. In this perspective, the occurrence of lethal conflict is not attributed solely to individual intention but is understood as involving an external spiritual dimension that may compel or influence behaviour. Consequently, ritual practices known as *Riaram Uyu* are performed by *Nyibus* to address these forces, aiming to pacify their influence and prevent recurrence of similar incidents. Customary responses after acts of *Gwngrii Talwng* often involve the temporary isolation of the perpetrator, observance of taboos, and performance of purification rituals conducted by *Nyibus* (priests). Through these practices, the community seeks to neutralise spiritual contamination associated with the act and restore disrupted equilibrium.

Importantly, the conceptual foundation of *Gwngrii Talwng* is not confined to customary regulation but is anchored in narrative memory that explains its primordial emergence. Community interpretations consistently link contemporary occurrences of murder to mythological precedent, suggesting that lethal violence entered the human world through an initial act of fratricide recounted in oral tradition. Consequently, *Gwngrii Talwng* represents not simply a category of wrongdoing but a historically remembered condition whose meaning is sustained through narrative transmission, moral discourse, and ritual practice. Understanding this conceptual framework provides a necessary basis for examining the origin narrative that follows, through which the Tagin tribe articulates the emergence of violence within their historical and cosmological imagination.

#### 4.2 Narrative of Origin: Brotherhood, Transformation, and Fratricide

Tagin oral tradition recounts the remembered emergence of lethal conflict through a narrative that appears in several performative variants yet retains a consistent thematic core. Many expert narrators situate the episode within the genealogical line of *Abutanyi*, widely acknowledged as the earliest human ancestor of the Tagin people. According to this version, *Abutanyi* and his wife *Hilw Golii* had two sons, *Nyisu* and *Nyinyu*, whose upbringing was marked by shared subsistence activities, mutual reliance, and emotional closeness. The brothers regularly ventured into the forest for hunting, including the trapping of wild rats using a traditional technique known as *Avdw Gonam*, reflecting everyday patterns of cooperative livelihood. In certain narrative renditions, the brothers are remembered by alternative personal names, with the elder referred to as *Bengtv* and the younger as *Bengnyi*, indicating the presence of localized naming variations within the broader oral tradition while preserving the central thematic structure of the account.

Over time, subtle differences in both the brothers hunting returns became noticeable. While *Nyinyu*, the younger sibling, habitually brought back animals in their entirety, *Nyisu* increasingly returned with prey that appeared partially consumed, with segments of flesh missing or visibly torn. The recurrence of this pattern generated curiosity in *Nyinyu*. Determined to understand the cause of this irregularity, *Nyinyu* resolved to follow his elder brother discreetly during one of their forest journeys. Concealed within the surrounding vegetation, he observed *Nyisu* capture animals and consumes portions of their flesh immediately after trapping them, eating the meat raw before carrying the remaining parts home. This unexpected revelation unsettled *Nyinyu*, introducing a sense of unease into a relationship previously characterised by openness and mutual trust. When *Nyisu* realised that his actions had been witnessed, feelings of embarrassment and discomfort arose, marking the beginning of emotional distance between the brothers. In the period that followed, *Nyisu* told *Nyinyu* that he could no longer live with him as his habits have entirely become opposite to that of human life. Therefore, despite several request by *Nyinyu*, to return home *Nyisu* gradually withdrew from ordinary village life and chose to reside within the forest environment. Before departing, he instructed *Nyinyu* not to disclose what had been witnessed and requested periodic visit on first, third, fifth and seventh days. Also, he asked *Nyinyu* to cover him up with *Rengte* leaves (identified as a kind of poisonous forest foliage) while resting in concealment, symbolising an intermediate state between human society and forest otherness.

*Nyinyu* began visiting *Nyisu*'s dwelling place and these encounters *Nyinyu* began to notice unusual physical changes affecting his elder brother. Distinct stripe-like markings called *Patv Riinam* appeared across *Nyisu*'s body, becoming more pronounced with each meeting and signalling a transformation. Eventually, the transformation reached completion, and *Nyisu* assumed the form of a tiger, an entity occupying a complex relational position within Tagin understanding. Despite this ontological shift, kinship recognition persisted, and the tiger came to be addressed through the term *Abang Apa* (elder brother), preserving memory of shared ancestry.

Following the completion of his transformation, *Nyisu* revealed his altered condition to *Nyinyu* and cautioned him against disclosing this reality to anyone. He emphasised that the knowledge of his metamorphosis must remain confined between them and warned that any breach of this promise would compel him to return and kill his younger brother regardless of distance or circumstance. The gravity of this declaration deeply affected *Nyinyu*, who experienced sorrow at the prospect of separation and repeatedly urged his elder sibling to return home. *Nyisu*, however, declined these appeals, choosing to remain within the forested domain that had become his permanent habitat. In response, *Nyinyu* pledged to honour the request and gave his word to maintain silence regarding his brother's transformation. Despite adopting the form of a tiger, *Nyisu* continued for some time to demonstrate concern for his sibling's wellbeing. Familiar with the routes they had previously travelled together, he deliberately hunted wild animals and placed them along pathways regularly used by *Nyinyu*, enabling the younger brother to retrieve the prey and carry it home. This quiet assistance sustained traces of fraternal responsibility even as physical separation persisted. Over time, however, encounters became infrequent, and the coexistence of affection and apprehension gradually gave way to mutual fear, marking the eventual cessation of such acts of care.

The narrative subsequently diverges into an extended temporal frame in which *Nyisu* remained permanently within the forest as *Abang Apa*, while *Nyinyu* continued human lineage and family life. Years later, having grown old and surrounded by descendants, *Nyinyu* was seated on the verandah of his dwelling narrating stories to his grandchildren. During this moment of recollection, his thoughts turned toward his elder brother, and in an unguarded expression he uttered *Nyisu*'s name, wondering aloud about his condition within the forest. This spontaneous reference aroused the curiosity of the children, who persistently requested that he share the story of his brother.

After repeated appeals, *Nyinyu* began recounting the episode of transformation. Midway through this narration, an incidental occurrence interrupted the storytelling: his comb, known in the Tagin dialect as *Toksap*, slipped from the verandah to the ground below while one of the children attended to his hair. Traditional Tagin houses, constructed on elevated bamboo platforms, create a space beneath the flooring referred to as *gumpa*. When *Nyinyu* asked the children to retrieve the fallen *Toksap*, they hesitated, explaining that a large dog was present under the *Gumpa*. This remark triggered sudden realisation in *Nyinyu*, who recognised that by uttering his brother's name and revealing the story he had violated the promise he once made.

With this awareness, *Nyinyu* quietly entered his house and emerged carrying a bow and arrow, anticipating the consequence foretold by his elder sibling. As he released an arrow toward the figure concealed beneath the *Gumpa*, *Nyisu*, now *Abang Apa*, lunged forward and seized him by the neck. The confrontation resulted in the death of both brothers, an event remembered as establishing the enduring equivalence between killing a human and killing a tiger. It is believed that since then this episode of fratricide led to acts of *Gwngrii Talwng* in human beings.

### 4.3 *Gwngrii Talwng* as Origin of Violence between Human Beings

Within Tagin interpretive frameworks, the narrative of *Nyisu* and *Nyinyu* is understood not merely as a story of transformation but as a foundational account explaining the emergence of lethal conflict among humans. Community interpretations consistently identify the episode as the moment through which the condition later recognised as *Gwngrii Talwng* first manifested within the human domain. The narrative thus functions as an etiological account, providing culturally meaningful explanation for the presence of killing within social experience.

A central element shaping this interpretation is the rupture of fraternal relationship that unfolds throughout the story. The brothers' early companionship and shared subsistence practices establish a relational baseline characterised by cooperation and mutual reliance. Against this background, the subsequent progression; from

secrecy and withdrawal to apprehension and confrontation, renders the final act of killing particularly significant. Violence is not portrayed as arising between strangers or adversaries but within an intimate kinship bond, thereby emphasising its gravity and moral weight within Tagin understanding. Equally consequential is the motif of promise and its eventual violation. The elder brother's instruction to maintain secrecy regarding his transformation and the younger brother's pledge to honour this request introduce a moral dimension centered on trust and obligation. The later utterance of the elder's name during storytelling, though unintended as betrayal, is interpreted as a breach that reactivates the earlier warning. This narrative element reinforces the perception that lethal conflict is linked to broken relational commitments, further situating *Gwngrii Talwng* within a moral universe shaped by responsibility and consequence. The culmination of the narrative in mutual death carries additional interpretive significance. The simultaneous killing of human and tiger establishes symbolic equivalence between the two acts, reflecting the enduring kinship association expressed through the designation of the tiger as *Abang Apa*. Within community memory, this equivalence contributes to understanding that the taking of life, whether human or kin-associated animal, constitutes a profound relational rupture with lasting implications. Through this framing, the narrative provides explanatory grounding for subsequent attitudes toward killing and its perceived seriousness.

#### 4.4 Ritual Invocation of the Narrative and the Contemporary Significance of *Gwngrii Talwng*

The interpretive significance of the narrative extends beyond its role as an account of origins and enters the domain of lived ritual practice within Tagin society. Contemporary responses to incidents of killing frequently involve ceremonial procedures in which *Nyibus* (priests) recount the episode of *Nyisu* and *Nyinyu* as part of ritual engagement with the event. Through such recitation, the narrative is repositioned from remembered history to active ceremonial resource, demonstrating its continuing relevance in shaping community responses to lethal occurrences.

During rituals performed in the aftermath of murder or intra-familial killing, the chanting of this narrative functions as an invocation of the primordial precedent through which *Gwngrii Talwng* first manifested. Community understanding holds that the initial episode established not only the possibility of lethal conflict but also the presence of spiritual forces associated with such acts. Consequently, ritual specialists recount the story to acknowledge this origin, address the spiritual dimension believed to accompany contemporary incidents, and situate the present event within a broader continuum of remembered experience.

The ceremonial narration is also interpreted as a means of communicating with the spiritual agency perceived to underlie acts of killing. By recalling the first occurrence and articulating its sequence within ritual space, the *Nyibu* symbolically engages the forces connected with *Gwngrii Talwng*, seeking their pacification and containment. This process reflects a culturally embedded understanding that violent events are not solely social disruptions but phenomena intertwined with unseen influences requiring negotiated resolution through ritual practice.

Equally important is the preventive orientation of such ceremonial engagement. The recitation of the narrative is believed to contribute to averting further occurrences by restoring balance and reaffirming moral boundaries within the community. Through collective listening and participation, community members are reminded of the relational rupture and consequences embedded within the origin account, reinforcing shared awareness of the seriousness of lethal acts. In this way, the narrative serves both as explanatory memory and as instrument of social regulation.

The persistence of this ritual practice illustrates the dynamic relationship between narrative, morality, and ceremony in Tagin society. Rather than remaining confined to storytelling contexts, the account of *Nyisu* and *Nyinyu* continues to inform communal action, guiding ritual responses to contemporary events while sustaining collective interpretation of *Gwngrii Talwng*. The integration of narrative recitation within ceremonial practice thus highlights how historical memory is mobilised to address present realities, underscoring the enduring cultural authority of oral tradition in mediating experiences of violence.

## 5. Conclusion

This study examined the historical origins and contemporary significance of *Gwngrii Talwng* within Tagin society through an analysis of oral tradition and ritual practice. By foregrounding the narrative concerning *Nyisu* and *Nyinyu*, the paper has demonstrated how Tagin historical consciousness situates the emergence of lethal conflict within a remembered episode characterised by transformation, relational rupture, and reciprocal death. The account, preserved across multiple narrative variants, provides a culturally authoritative reference point through which the presence of killing in human experience is interpreted and contextualised.

The analysis further revealed that *Gwngrii Talwng* constitutes a multidimensional category extending beyond the occurrence of lethal acts to encompass moral responsibility, spiritual influence, and ceremonial response. Community understandings linking incidents of killing with the agency of *Riaram Uyu* illustrate an interpretive framework in which human behaviour is viewed as entangled with unseen forces, thereby necessitating ritual mediation. In this regard, practices such as *Riaram Yuyu* performed by Nyibus reflect collective efforts to address the spiritual dimensions of violence while seeking to prevent recurrence and restore equilibrium.

Equally significant is the enduring ritual relevance of the origin narrative itself. The continued recitation of the story during ceremonies associated with killing highlights the dynamic relationship between historical memory and contemporary practice. Rather than remaining confined to the realm of storytelling, the narrative operates as a living resource that informs moral reflection, guides ceremonial action, and sustains collective awareness of the relational consequences embedded within acts of violence. Through this integration of narrative and ritual, Tagin society maintains a culturally grounded mechanism for interpreting and responding to lethal occurrences.

By situating *Gwngrii Talwng* at the intersection of oral historiography, moral reasoning, and ritual performance, the study contributes to expanding scholarly understanding of how indigenous communities conceptualise violence within culturally specific frameworks. The findings underscore the importance of attending to narrative traditions as sources of historical knowledge and as active components of social regulation.

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