



GEO-CULTURAL LANDSCAPE OF ADIS: AN ANALYSIS OF CULTURAL HERITAGE IN THE LOWER DIBANG VALLEY OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH

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Abstract: This study examines the geo-cultural landscape of the Adi tribe in the Lower Dibang Valley of Arunachal Pradesh, India, highlighting the intricate and dynamic relationship between the Adi people and their natural environment. The region's diverse topography and rich biodiversity are closely linked with the Adis' traditional ecological knowledge, social institutions, festivals, oral traditions, and spiritual practices. Key indigenous institutions such as the **Kebang** (village council) and **Musup Yame** (youth dormitory) play a pivotal role in community governance and the preservation of cultural norms. Festivals such as **Solung**, **Piime**, and **Aaran**, along with traditional dances like **Ponung** and **Tapu**, not only express cultural identity but also reinforce social cohesion and the community's deep-rooted connection to nature. However, modernization has brought significant challenges, including the weakening of traditional institutions, transformations in religious beliefs, and the growing influence of external cultures. In response, this study proposes a set of comprehensive strategies: community-based heritage management, systematic documentation and archiving of cultural traditions, integration of indigenous knowledge into educational curricula, promotion of sustainable cultural tourism, and legal pluralism that formally recognizes customary laws. Implementing these measures can ensure the preservation of the Adi tribe's rich cultural heritage while fostering sustainable development in the region.

Keywords: *Adi tribe, geo-cultural landscape, cultural heritage, traditional ecological knowledge, Kebang, Musup Yame, Solung festival, modernization, Arunachal Pradesh, sustainable development.*

I. INTRODUCTION:

A geo-cultural landscape is a region that captures the complex and ever-changing relationship between the natural world and the institutions, values, and cultural practices that people have developed over time. The physical characteristics of the land, such as rivers, mountains, forests, and climate, are intricately entwined with cultural elements like land use practices, religious beliefs, settlement patterns, and sacred sites. This illustrates the co-evolution of humans and nature. According to Taylor and Lennon (2011), a geo-cultural landscape is "a landscape imbued with cultural meanings that reflect the spiritual, social, and economic interactions of people with their environment over time, often resulting in a distinctive character that is both ecologically and culturally significant." This idea highlights the fact that landscapes are living cultural spaces that are influenced by the knowledge systems, traditions, and shared identities of communities rather than just being natural terrain. Geo-cultural landscapes are more than just physical surroundings in indigenous contexts, like those of the Adi tribe in Arunachal Pradesh; they are also considered sacred geographies, areas governed by customary law, and places of cultural memory that have been passed down through the ages. These landscapes are significant both materially and symbolically, and they are essential to social organization, resource management, and spiritual life. Maintaining biocultural diversity, honoring indigenous knowledge, and advancing sustainable cultural heritage practices all depend on an appreciation of the importance of geo-cultural landscapes (Taylor & Lennon, 2011; Berkes, 1999; Maffi, 2005; Nazarea, 1999; UNESCO, 2003).

Cultural practices that foster social order, group identity, and individual freedom are the cornerstones of civilization (Arnold, 2006). From tangible items like monuments and tools to intangible elements like language, customs, beliefs, rituals, and the innate bond between people and their natural environment, cultural heritage covers a broad range (UNESCO, 2003). In order to preserve continuity and identity for future generations, it is morally required that current generations preserve this priceless and irreplaceable legacy (Smith, 2006). It is extremely difficult for indigenous communities living in remote areas to preserve their cultural legacy. Oral histories, rituals, indigenous ecological knowledge, and other intangible cultural elements are generally delicate and susceptible to deterioration as a result of modernization, migration, globalization, and shifting value systems, in contrast to tangible heritage that is preserved in museums, archives, or protected sites (Kurin, 2004). Group cohesion and identity are maintained by the dynamic nature of culture, which includes linguistic traditions, artistic expressions, social-spiritual systems, and customary governance (Geertz, 1973). The Adi tribe of the Lower Dibang Valley of Arunachal Pradesh is the subject of this study; they are a culturally rich but little-studied group. It seeks to record and examine the Adis's geocultural environment, including their social structures, festivals, oral traditions, mythological roots, and environmental relationships, as well as the changes brought about by contemporary influences. The study adds to discussions on identity politics, tribal heritage preservation, and the difficult balancing act between tradition and modernity by using this ethnographic lens.

II. DATA BASE METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative, ethnographic methodology that combines organized data collection with field observation:

- a) Fieldwork: In-depth tours of important Adi villages in Roing and Dambuk, taking part in celebrations like Solung, documenting cultural performances, and observing daily life.
- b) Structured Interviews and Questionnaires: Conducted with women, youth, community leaders, and elders (Abus) to record oral histories, customary laws, attitudes toward modernization, and perceptions of cultural change.
- c) Focus Group Discussions: Led to gather community agreement on issues of cultural ethics, challenges to custom, and preservation goals.

Government census data, district reports, academic monographs, journal articles, and archival ethnographies are the secondary sources, demographic, and historical background.

III. GEOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND:

The Lower Dibang Valley District of Arunachal Pradesh occupies an area of roughly 3,900 square kilometers and is located between latitudes 28°30'N and 38°04'N and longitudes 91°20'E and 95°40'E. The district was formally established in 2001 and is bordered to the north by the Dibang Valley, to the east by Lohit District and the McMahon Line that borders China, to the west by the East and Upper Siang Districts, and to the south by the Tinsukia District of Assam (Government of Arunachal Pradesh, 2011). The Dibang River and its tributaries, the Ahui, Adzon, Emra, and Dri, have carved the district's foothills, steep mountain slopes, and deeply incised river valleys into a mosaic. With elevations ranging from roughly 500 meters in riverine valleys to the 2,655-meter-high Mayudia Pass, the area's terrain is untamed and ecologically varied. A vital watershed and hotspot for biodiversity, the Mishmi Hills are a part of the Eastern Himalayan range that stretches into the northern reaches and rises sharply to elevations of over 4,750 meters (Singh, 2002).

The environmental setting in which the Adi tribe's subsistence and cultural practices developed was influenced by the varied altitudinal gradients, abundant forest cover, and intense monsoon rainfall. Because of the area's relative isolation, its residents have historically been protected, which has helped to preserve distinctive ecological and cultural knowledge systems. Demographic and Cultural Background: According to the 2011 census, there are roughly 53,986 people living in the Lower Dibang Valley, with a literacy rate of 70.38 percent. With the Adi and Mishmi communities as the two largest ethnic groups, the population is primarily tribal. Subgroups like the Padams, Milangs, Minyongs, and Pasis are the most prevalent among the Adis; they are mainly found in the vicinity of Roing, Dambuk, and surrounding villages (Dutta, 1991). The Adis engage in traditional animal husbandry, horticulture, and the collection of forest resources in addition to subsistence farming. Ecological cycles are closely reflected in agricultural procedures, which prioritize terrace farming and shifting cultivation (jhum). Along with traditional culinary practices like making and drinking Apong, a fermented rice beer essential to social and ceremonial gatherings, the staple foods consist of culturally significant crops like millet, rice, and maize (Nath, 2014). Ritual festivals that

express their relationship with nature and the supernatural, intricate kinship networks, lively oral traditions, and participatory village governance are characteristics of the Adi society. Thus, the Adis' physical landscape is intrinsically linked to their cultural identity, highlighting the geo-cultural aspects of their heritage.

IV. INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

A fundamental idea in indigenous studies is the interdependence of culture and environment (Berkes, 1999). Based on centuries of observation, experimentation, and spiritual experience, traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) systems provide an adaptable framework that makes sustainable resource management possible. A wide range of topics are covered by indigenous knowledge, such as farming methods, biodiversity preservation, weather forecasting, and ceremonial observances that promote ecological stewardship (Nazarea, 1999). The interdependence of culture and environment is a central concept in indigenous studies (Berkes, 1999). Traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) systems offer a flexible framework that enables sustainable resource management, drawing from centuries of observation, experimentation, and spiritual experience. Indigenous knowledge encompasses a wide range of topics, including weather forecasting, farming practices, biodiversity preservation, and ceremonial observances that encourage ecological stewardship (Nazarea, 1999).

V. ETHNOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVES

The Adi people live across a broad altitudinal range, from subtropical valleys to temperate Himalayan hills, and were once referred to in colonial records as "Abor," which means "uncontrolled" or "rebellious" (Brown, 1876). According to Pandey (1990), they speak a Tibeto-Burman language that has multiple dialects that correspond to different subgroups, such as Padam, Minyong, Milang, and Pasi. The Adi identity is united by common cultural motifs and social institutions, despite dialectical variation. The village council, also known as Kebang, is the democratic and participatory body that oversees community welfare, customary law enforcement, and conflict resolution in Adi society (Dutta, 1991). The Musup Yame, a youth organization that has traditionally served as an enforcement arm and a steward of tradition, supports this council (Sharma, 2005). Festivals like Solung, Piime, and Aaran, which align with agricultural cycles and ancestral worship, are important ways for people to express their cultural identity (Tayang, 2010). Ponung, Tapu, and Yakjong are examples of traditional dances that strengthen social cohesion by reenacting collective myths (Bhattacharjee, 1981). Myths, genealogies, and customary laws are passed down orally from generation to generation, preserving collective memory and bolstering group identity.

VI. SOCIO-LEGAL INSTITUTIONS AND TRANSFORMATION

Based on customary laws that have been passed down orally through the generations, the Kebang functions on the tenets of restorative justice and consensus (Gogoi, 2004). Invoking holy beings like Kalu Kebo and Qumin-Soyin to validate authority, these laws combine social conventions with spiritual beliefs. Law and spirituality are entwined through rituals like oath-taking, water ordeals, and communal feasts that accompany court proceedings. Mainly made up of young men, the Musup Yame maintains social order, plans festivals, and imposes fines. However, formal policing, contemporary education, and shifting social aspirations have all contributed to this institution's diminished role in recent decades (Bora, 2018). The wider difficulties that indigenous governance systems face in the face of modernization and legal pluralism are reflected in this erosion.

VII. MYTHOLOGICAL ORIGINS AND CLAN STRUCTURE

Clan Structure and Mythological Origins The two main figures in the Adi cosmology are Tani, the first man, who is thought to have been descended from Sedi Melo, the divine creator, and Pedong Nane, the ancestral mother. According to this mythological framework, the Adi are situated in a sacred landscape with spiritually significant natural features such as rivers, mountains, and forests (Tayang, 2010). Bogum and Bomi are the two main exogamous moieties that make up society. They serve as the foundation for marriage alliances and social organization. Clans (such as Minyong, Padam, and Milang) are subdivided into by each moiety and follow a patrilineal line of descent. Clan identities reinforce social cohesion and collective responsibility by regulating social roles, inheritance, ritual responsibilities, and conflict resolution.

VIII. TRADITIONAL INSTITUTIONS

The Kebang meets in communal halls called Dere or Moshup and functions as a democratic council of elders (Abus). It resolves conflicts, plans celebrations, oversees neighborhood assets, and enforces customary laws. In order to legitimize decisions, the council uses a combination of legal pragmatism and ceremonial observances, operating on consensus (Dutta, 1991). Traditionally, the youth enforcement group, the Musup Yame, was essential in upholding social order, planning group work, collecting fines, and arranging festivals (Sharma, 2005). However, with the growth of formal state law enforcement and contemporary education, its influence has diminished. This shift poses risks to community self-governance and the transmission of cultural values among younger generations.

IX. FESTIVALS AND RITUALS:

Rituals and Festivals: Displays of Cultural Identity The most important agricultural festival is the five-day Solung festival, which takes place in September. It includes communal feasting, ceremonial offerings to the gods, and traditional dances like Tapu and Ponung. According to Bhattacharjee (1981), these dances tell myths, ask for blessings for bountiful harvests, and strengthen social bonds. Other seasonal transitions are marked by the Piime festival in November and the Aaran festival in March, which include fertility, ancestor worship, and protection from evil forces. The fermented rice beer known as apong is essential to both these celebrations and regular social interactions. When consumed during ceremonies and social gatherings, it represents hospitality, communal bonding, and ritual purity (Nath, 2014). Its oral transmission of preparation methods and cultural significance emphasizes how material and intangible heritage are intertwined.

X. SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND PROPERTY RIGHTS

The Adi have a patriarchal and patrilineal social structure. Male ancestry is used to inherit land, livestock (especially mithun cattle), and significant property. In accordance with gendered norms surrounding economic rights, daughters are given movable property, such as ornaments and personal belongings (Dutta, 1991). As a store of wealth, bride price, and ritual offering, mithun cattle serve both symbolic and economic purposes, integrating economic activity into cultural contexts. Clan cohesion is strengthened by property relations, which have an impact on social standing, marriage alliances, and dispute resolution.

XI. ORAL TRADITIONS AND LEGAL CUSTOM

The Adi's oral traditions—myths, songs, and ritual narratives—that convey moral principles and social norms are intricately entwined with their customary law (Gogoi, 2004). These customs call upon supernatural beings like the guardian spirits Qumin-Soyin and the protective deity Kalu Kebo, whose approval validates social control and conflict resolution procedures. The distinction between law and religion is blurred by symbolic rituals used in legal processes, such as taking an oath by the river, holding communal feasts as restitution, and reciting ritualized apologies. Alongside official Indian judicial systems, this legal pluralism can occasionally cause conflict and necessitate negotiation (Bora, 2018).

XII. IMPACT OF MODERNIZATION AND SOCIO-CULTURAL CHANGE

Effects of Sociocultural Change and Modernization Significant changes have occurred over the past 20 years as a result of formal state governance, education, Christianity, and market integration. Education has improved socioeconomic mobility and literacy, but it has also diminished the significance of traditional organizations like the Kebang and Musup Yame (Sharma, 2005). Participation in indigenous festivals has decreased, new moral codes have been introduced, and ritual calendars have been changed as a result of Christianization (Tayang, 2010). As a result of increased external cultural influences brought about by road construction and telecommunications, youth aspirations and consumption patterns have changed. Oral knowledge transmission between generations is at risk due to demographic changes brought on by migration for work and education. The survival of indigenous heritage and social cohesion are at risk due to these changes, even though they are encouraging integration and development. It is crucial to strike a balance between modernity and cultural preservation.

XIII. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Lower Dibang Valley's Adi tribe represents a diverse geocultural landscape where tradition, identity, and environment all come together. Their cultural heritage, which is reflected in festivals, social structures,

myths, and ecological knowledge, provides important understanding into resilient communities and sustainable living. But this legacy is changing due to modernization, religious conversion, and outside governance structures, which frequently undermine customs and legal frameworks. The need of the hour is the preservation of cultural heritage of Adis with the below suggested strategy:

- a.Documentation and Archiving: Using audio-visual technologies, thorough ethnographic and linguistic documentation of oral traditions, rituals, and customary laws should be carried out.
- b. Community-Based Heritage Management: empowering local councils like Kebang and combining traditional governance with support and legal recognition from the state.
- c.Cultural Education: indigenous history and knowledge be introduced officially in school curricula to promote pride and continuity.
- d.Clarifying the intricate relationships between culture and environment in indigenous contexts and emphasizing the value of comprehensive preservation techniques in quickly evolving societies.

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