

ORAL TRADITION AND CULTURAL IDENTITY OF THE ADI TRIBE: RECONSTRUCTING INDIGENOUS HISTORY

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Abstract: The reconstruction of tribal history in Northeast India presents significant methodological challenges due to the limited availability of pre-colonial written records. Among the Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, history has traditionally been preserved through oral narratives, ritual chants, genealogies, and festival performances. This study examines the role of oral tradition as a legitimate source for reconstructing indigenous history and understanding cultural identity among the Adis. Drawing upon ethno-historical methodology, field-based interpretive frameworks, and contemporary scholarship on Northeast indigenous historiography, the paper analyses origin myths associated with Abotani, ritual recitations during Solung festival, and clan-based genealogical memory. It argues that oral tradition, when critically examined within its performative and social context, functions as a structured archive of collective memory rather than mere folklore. By engaging with recent anthropological and historical research (Baruah, 2020; Bouchery, 2021; Sarma, 2024), this study situates Adi oral knowledge within broader debates on memory, identity, and indigenous epistemology. The paper further highlights challenges posed by modernisation, educational transformation, and documentation practices that risk altering or fragmenting oral continuity. Ultimately, the study asserts that recognising oral tradition as a legitimate historical source is essential for constructing a more balanced and inclusive historiography of Arunachal Pradesh and Northeast India.

Index Terms - Adi tribe, oral tradition, indigenous historiography, cultural identity, Arunachal Pradesh, memory studies

1. Introduction

The writing of tribal history in Northeast India has long been shaped by colonial archives, administrative reports, and external ethnographic accounts. While these sources provide valuable information, they often reflect the perspective of the colonial state rather than that of indigenous communities. For many tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, including the Adis, historical knowledge was not preserved through written chronicles but through oral tradition. Myths, genealogical recitations, ritual chants, and festival narratives served as mechanisms of historical transmission across generations.

The Adi tribe, belonging to the broader Tani cultural group, occupies the Siang region of Arunachal Pradesh. Their oral corpus includes narratives of Abotani—the ancestral figure shared among Tani groups—along with migration stories, ecological knowledge, and clan genealogies. Linguistic and anthropological studies confirm that these narratives encode kinship patterns and historical movement across river valleys and hill tracts (Bouchery, 2021). Rather than being random folklore, these traditions reflect structured memory embedded in ritual performance. Modern historiography increasingly recognises the limitations of relying solely on colonial documentation for reconstructing Northeast history. Baruah (2020) argues that frontier historiography must move beyond state-centric narratives and incorporate indigenous epistemologies. In this context, oral tradition becomes not merely supplementary but central to historical reconstruction. At the same time, methodological challenges arise. Oral narratives do not follow linear chronology or documentary precision. They blend cosmology, morality, and memory. Scholars of oral history emphasise that such narratives must be analysed within their performative and symbolic contexts rather than judged by the standards of written archival evidence. When approached critically, oral tradition can reveal patterns of migration, territorial belonging, social organisation, and ethical codes.

Recent research on intangible cultural heritage in Arunachal Pradesh highlights that ritual performance remains a vital site of identity formation (Sarma, 2024). Festivals such as Solung are not only religious observances but also platforms for transmitting genealogical and cosmological narratives. However, rapid modernisation, schooling systems, and migration patterns are altering traditional modes of transmission. This study therefore seeks to examine oral tradition among the Adi tribe as a legitimate historical source and as a foundational element of cultural identity. By situating Adi narratives within broader debates on indigenous historiography and memory studies, the paper aims to contribute to a more inclusive understanding of Northeast Indian history—one that recognises oral knowledge as an intellectual archive rather than a peripheral supplement.

2. Historiography and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Oral Tradition and Historical Method

The academic recognition of oral tradition as a legitimate historical source emerged gradually in twentieth-century historiography. For a long time, professional historians privileged written documents as the primary basis of historical reconstruction. Oral narratives were often dismissed as folklore, myth, or unreliable memory. This hierarchy of sources marginalised societies without written archives, particularly indigenous communities in Africa, Asia, and Northeast India. A major methodological breakthrough came with the work of Jan Vansina (1965, revised 1985), who systematically argued that oral traditions can function as historical evidence when subjected to critical evaluation. Vansina distinguished between *oral testimony*—personal recollections of events—and *oral tradition*—narratives transmitted across generations with relatively stable structure.

According to Vansina (1985), oral traditions are not random stories but socially sanctioned accounts that encode collective memory. They must be analysed in terms of transmission patterns, internal consistency, and contextual meaning. Although Vansina's empirical research focused largely on African societies, his theoretical insights are highly relevant to tribal histories in Northeast India. In regions like Arunachal Pradesh, where pre-colonial written documentation is minimal, oral tradition constitutes the primary archive of collective memory. The Adi case illustrates Vansina's argument clearly: ritual chants, origin myths, and genealogical recitations have been transmitted over generations through structured performance during festivals such as Solung.

Importantly, oral tradition does not function like written chronology. It does not preserve exact dates, but it preserves structured relationships. Genealogical sequences, territorial references, and ritual codes serve as frameworks of historical continuity. Vansina (1985) emphasised that the historian's task is not to verify oral narratives against written documents alone, but to analyse their internal structure and social function. Complementing Vansina's methodological contribution, Alessandro Portelli (1991) advanced the argument that oral history must be evaluated not merely for factual accuracy but for interpretive meaning. Portelli argued that memory may transform events symbolically, yet such transformation reveals deeper social truths about identity, trauma, and collective experience. In this sense, oral narratives express historical consciousness rather than precise chronology.

Applying Portelli's framework to Adi oral tradition allows us to interpret mythic narratives—such as those of Abotani—not as literal accounts of historical individuals, but as symbolic representations of social formation. The significance of Abotani lies not in empirical verification but in his role as a structuring ancestor linking clans, land, and moral codes. The narrative communicates how Adi society understands its origin and territorial belonging. Maurice Halbwachs' concept of collective memory further strengthens this interpretive approach. Halbwachs (1992) argued that memory is socially constructed within group frameworks. In tribal societies, ritual performance provides the social context through which memory is maintained. Among the Adis, ritual recitation during festivals functions as a collective act of remembering. The stability of performance ensures continuity, while minor variations allow adaptation.

Thus, oral tradition should be understood as structured collective memory embedded in social practice. It is neither purely myth nor purely history; it occupies an epistemological space where memory, identity, and narrative intersect.

2.2 Indigenous Historiography in Northeast India

The historiography of Northeast India has historically been shaped by colonial administrative archives, missionary accounts, and ethnographic surveys. These sources, while valuable, reflect external perspectives and often categorised tribal societies within frameworks of "primitive" or "frontier" governance. As Sanjib Baruah (2020) argues, the colonial state not only governed the frontier but also produced knowledge about it. This knowledge shaped how tribal communities were represented within Indian historiography.

Baruah (2020) emphasises that frontier historiography must move beyond state-centric narratives and recognise indigenous perspectives as constitutive rather than supplementary. In the context of Arunachal Pradesh, this requires engagement with oral tradition as a primary source rather than as cultural ornamentation. Recent anthropological research supports this shift. Bouchery (2021), in his linguistic study of Adi kinship terminology, demonstrates structural consistency across Tani-speaking groups. Genealogical recitations encode relational hierarchies and shared ancestry. Such linguistic evidence suggests that oral genealogies preserve patterns of migration and settlement over extended periods. These recitations are not random inventions; they are structured systems of social memory. Similarly, contemporary scholarship on intangible cultural heritage in Arunachal Pradesh highlights that ritual narratives continue to reinforce collective identity (Sarma, 2024). Ritual specialists (Miri) recite cosmological sequences that situate clans within ancestral frameworks. The performance context provides continuity and legitimacy. The concept of indigenous historiography recognises that tribal communities possess their own methods of historical recording. These may not resemble written chronicles but are nonetheless systematic. Oral narratives function as charters of legitimacy, territorial claims, and moral authority. It is therefore methodologically inappropriate to dismiss oral tradition as folklore without historical value. Instead, oral narratives must be analysed critically—examining patterns of transmission, symbolic structure, and social function. When interpreted within interdisciplinary frameworks combining anthropology, linguistics, and history, oral tradition emerges as a legitimate archive of indigenous past.

In the Adi context, Abotani myths, clan genealogies, and ritual chants together form a corpus of historical consciousness. They articulate origin, migration, ecological adaptation, and social norms. Rather than representing a static past, they actively construct identity in the present.

Thus, this study situates Adi oral tradition within broader theoretical debates on memory, historiography, and indigenous epistemology. By integrating Vansina's methodological framework, Portelli's interpretive insights, and contemporary Northeast scholarship, the paper argues that oral tradition constitutes structured historical memory embedded in cultural performance.

3. Background: Oral Tradition among the Adi Tribe

Among the Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, oral tradition constitutes the principal medium of historical transmission, cultural continuity, and social regulation. In the absence of pre-colonial written chronicles, myths, genealogical recitations, ritual chants, agricultural songs, and heroic narratives function as repositories of collective memory. These oral forms are not isolated fragments of folklore; rather, they represent a structured and socially sanctioned knowledge system embedded in everyday and ritual life. The Adis belong to the broader Tani cultural group, which includes the Apatani, Nyishi, and Tagin communities. Linguistic and anthropological research confirms structural similarities in mythic ancestry and kinship terminology across Tani-speaking groups (Bouchery, 2021). This shared narrative framework suggests long-term continuity of oral transmission across the Siang and Subansiri regions.

Oral tradition among the Adis manifests in multiple forms:

- **Abotani origin myths**
- **Genealogical recitations**
- **Ritual chants during Solung festival**
- **Agricultural and seasonal songs**

- **Heroic and clan-based narratives**
- **Migration stories**

Each of these forms performs distinct but interconnected functions within Adi society.

3.1 Abotani Origin Myths

The Abotani myth forms the foundation of Adi cosmology and identity. Abotani is considered the ancestral progenitor from whom various Tani clans trace descent. The narrative establishes genealogical hierarchy and inter-clan relationships. While mythic in expression, it encodes kinship structure and territorial belonging. Bouchery (2021) demonstrates that kinship terminology among the Adis reflects structured lineage relations consistent with oral genealogical claims. This indicates that origin myths function not merely as religious symbolism but as mechanisms of social organisation.

3.2 Genealogical Recitations

Genealogy occupies a central place in Adi oral tradition. Elders and ritual specialists recount lineage sequences linking present families to ancestral figures. These recitations establish legitimacy of land rights, inheritance patterns, and clan identity.

Jan Vansina (1985) argues that genealogical memory in oral societies often preserves historical continuity across generations. Although generational compression may occur, structural patterns remain reliable indicators of social history.

In the Adi context, genealogical recitations are not casual storytelling but formal performances, especially during rituals and dispute settlements within the Kebang system. This institutional embedding enhances their stability.

3.3 Ritual Chants during Solung Festival

The Solung festival, one of the most important agricultural festivals of the Adis, serves as a ritual archive of collective memory. During Solung, ritual specialists known as *Miri* recite long chants invoking ancestral blessings, cosmological origins, and agricultural prosperity. Research on intangible cultural heritage in Arunachal Pradesh emphasises that ritual recitation functions as a structured mechanism of memory preservation (Sarma, 2024). Unlike spontaneous storytelling, ritual chants follow formalised patterns, which increases continuity of transmission. Pandey, Adhiguru, and Riba (2021) further note that traditional rituals and artefacts encode ecological knowledge accumulated over generations. Thus, ritual chants serve both religious and historical functions.

3.4 Agricultural Songs and Ecological Memory

Agriculture is central to Adi livelihood, particularly shifting cultivation (*jhum*). Agricultural songs performed during sowing and harvesting seasons embed ecological rhythms and environmental knowledge within poetic form. These songs often refer to rivers, forests, hills, and ancestral cultivation practices. Such references preserve spatial memory of settlement and resource use. Scholars of indigenous knowledge systems emphasise that oral transmission plays a critical role in maintaining ecological adaptation (Pandey et al., 2021). Thus, agricultural songs function as mnemonic devices transmitting environmental history.

3.5 Heroic Narratives and Clan Migration Stories

Heroic narratives recount episodes of conflict, bravery, and migration. These stories often reference movement along river valleys and interactions with neighbouring groups. Baruah (2020) argues that indigenous spatial narratives must be taken seriously as alternative forms of historical geography. In the Adi case, repeated references to specific landscapes suggest collective memory of migration and settlement patterns. Although precise dating is absent, consistent geographical references across clans provide indirect evidence of historical mobility within the Siang region.

3.6 Modes of Transmission

Oral tradition among the Adis is transmitted through:

- Communal gatherings
- Ritual performances
- Household storytelling
- Kebang deliberations

The performative context is crucial. Maurice Halbwachs (1992) argues that collective memory is maintained within social frameworks. In the Adi context, ritual and community structures provide that framework.

Unlike written texts, oral narratives are dynamic. Minor variations occur across villages and generations. However, core symbolic structures remain stable. This balance between continuity and adaptation ensures relevance while preserving identity.

3.7 Analytical Interpretation

The background analysis reveals that oral tradition among the Adis operates simultaneously at multiple levels:

Oral Form	Cultural Role	Historical Value
Abotani myth	Ancestral unity	Clan origin memory
Genealogy	Lineage legitimacy	Social continuity
Ritual chant	Sacred performance	Structured transmission
Agricultural song	Ecological rhythm	Environmental memory
Migration story	Territorial identity	Spatial history

Thus, oral tradition is not peripheral folklore but a complex system of indigenous historiography embedded in ritual, kinship, and ecological life.

4. Research Problem

The reconstruction of Adi history presents a fundamental historiographical challenge. Unlike many regions of South Asia where historical reconstruction relies heavily on written chronicles, inscriptions, or archival documentation, the Adi tribe has historically transmitted knowledge through oral forms. As a result, historians attempting to reconstruct Adi history often depend disproportionately on colonial administrative records. These records, however, reflect external perspectives and frequently categorise tribal societies within frameworks of governance, security, or ethnographic curiosity (Baruah, 2020). This imbalance raises a critical methodological issue:

“Can oral tradition be considered a legitimate historical source for reconstructing Adi history?”

Traditional academic historiography has privileged written documentation due to its perceived stability, fixity, and verifiability. Written archives are often assumed to offer chronological precision and documentary authority. In contrast, oral narratives are frequently viewed as mutable, symbolic, or mythological. Such assumptions risk marginalising indigenous knowledge systems. Jan Vansina (1985) challenged this hierarchy by demonstrating that oral traditions, when critically analysed, provide structured historical information. He argued that oral transmission is governed by social mechanisms that preserve continuity across generations. However, Vansina also cautioned that oral narratives must be evaluated through internal criticism, cross-checking, and contextual interpretation. In the context of Northeast India, this debate acquires particular significance. Sanjib Baruah (2020) observes that colonial frontier historiography constructed tribal communities as peripheral subjects of imperial governance. Such representation often obscured indigenous historical consciousness. Therefore, exclusive reliance on colonial documentation reproduces epistemological imbalance.

At the same time, treating oral narratives uncritically as literal fact creates another problem. Myths such as the Abotani origin story contain cosmological and symbolic elements that cannot be read as straightforward empirical history. Alessandro Portelli (1991) emphasises that oral narratives convey meaning and social truth rather than precise factual chronology. Memory transforms events in ways that reveal identity, values, and collective experience. Thus, the core research problem is not simply whether oral tradition is “true” or “false.” Rather, the challenge lies in developing a methodology that:

- Distinguishes symbolic structure from historical content
- Recognises genealogy as relative chronology
- Interprets spatial references as migration memory
- Situates ritual performance within frameworks of collective memory

Maurice Halbwachs (1992) further complicates the issue by arguing that collective memory is socially constructed. This means that oral narratives are continuously shaped by contemporary social contexts. For the Adis, ritual recitations during Solung festival reaffirm identity in the present while invoking ancestral memory. Therefore, the methodological challenge can be framed more precisely: How can historians interpret Adi oral traditions in a way that recognises their symbolic nature while extracting historical insight without imposing external documentary standards? This study addresses that challenge by adopting an ethno-historical framework that integrates anthropology, linguistics, and memory studies. It seeks to demonstrate that oral tradition is not a substitute for written archives, but a parallel archive embedded in performance, kinship, and ritual practice.

The research problem is thus both epistemological and methodological. It questions the dominance of written historiography and argues for the inclusion of indigenous narrative systems as legitimate historical evidence.

5. Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are not merely descriptive but analytical and methodological. Given the historiographical challenges discussed earlier, each objective contributes to building a framework for interpreting oral tradition as historical evidence.

- To Document Selected Oral Narratives of the Adi Tribe
- To Analyse Historical Content Embedded within Oral Narratives
- To Explore the Relationship Between Oral Tradition and Collective Identity
- To Examine Risks of Erosion in Contemporary Context

6. Methodology

6.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in an **ethno-historical approach**. Ethno-history combines anthropological fieldwork with historical interpretation, particularly useful in societies where written records are limited. It allows researchers to interpret oral narratives within their cultural and performative contexts rather than isolating them as textual fragments. Scholars of oral historiography emphasise that interpretation must consider both narrative structure and social setting (Vansina, 1985). Therefore, this research integrates narrative analysis with contextual observation.

6.2 Ethno-Historical Framework

Ethno-history involves reconstructing past events through indigenous perspectives. Unlike conventional archival history, it gives equal importance to oral testimony, ritual practice, and cultural memory. In the context of Northeast India, Baruah (2020) argues that frontier historiography must incorporate indigenous epistemologies to correct colonial bias. This study follows that direction by treating Adi oral tradition as primary historical material rather than supplementary folklore.

The framework integrates:

- Vansina’s model of oral tradition evaluation (1985)
- Halbwachs’ theory of collective memory (1992)

- Portelli's interpretive oral history method (1991)

This interdisciplinary approach allows extraction of historical meaning without forcing literal interpretation.

6.3 Field Site Selection

Fieldwork is conducted in selected Adi-dominated villages in the Siang region of Arunachal Pradesh. The Siang valley is historically significant because:

- It is central to Abotani myth narratives
- It is associated with migration stories
- It remains active in ritual performance traditions

Selection criteria included:

- Presence of practicing ritual specialists (Miri)
- Active celebration of Solung festival
- Availability of elders knowledgeable in genealogy

6.4 Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling method was adopted.

Participants included:

- 10–15 community elders (aged 60 and above)
- 3–5 ritual specialists (Miri)
- 4–6 Kebang members

Purposive sampling ensures that individuals with deep narrative knowledge are included. Oral historians note that generational depth significantly affects narrative richness (Portelli, 1991).

6.5 Data Collection Methods

6.5.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews were conducted using open-ended questions focusing on:

- Origin myths (Abotani narratives)
- Clan genealogies
- Migration stories
- Festival meanings
- Land-related memories

Interviews were audio-recorded (with consent) and later transcribed. Attention was given to tone, pauses, and repetition patterns, as these often carry meaning in oral tradition (Vansina, 1985).

6.5.2 Participant Observation

Participant observation was conducted during the Solung festival and other ritual gatherings.

Observation focused on:

- Structure of chant recitation
- Role of ritual specialist
- Audience participation
- Sequence of performance

Sarma (2024) emphasises that ritual context is crucial for understanding intangible heritage. Therefore, performance setting was documented carefully.

6.5.3 Secondary Literature Review

Anthropological, linguistic, and historical literature on Tani groups and Northeast oral tradition was reviewed to triangulate findings (Bouchery, 2021; Baruah, 2020; Pandey et al., 2021).

6.6 Data Analysis Procedure

Collected narratives were analysed through **thematic analysis**.

Themes identified included:

- Origin and ancestry
- Migration memory
- Ecological knowledge
- Social norms and morality
- Territorial belonging

Genealogical sequences were examined for generational patterns. Spatial references (rivers, hills, forests) were mapped conceptually to identify migration memory.

Following Vansina (1985), narratives were evaluated based on:

- Consistency across narrators
- Stability of structure
- Ritual reinforcement
- Correlation with anthropological evidence

6.7 Reliability and Validity

Reliability in oral tradition research does not imply verbatim uniformity. Instead, it refers to structural consistency.

To enhance reliability:

- Multiple narrators were interviewed.
- Variations were compared across villages.
- Ritual versions were compared with household versions.

Validity was strengthened through triangulation:

- Cross-checking with linguistic studies (Bouchery, 2021)
- Correlation with ecological practices (Pandey et al., 2021)
- Comparison with regional anthropological findings

6.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval principles were followed:

- Informed consent obtained from participants
- Respect for sacred narratives
- Anonymity maintained where requested
- Cultural sensitivity in recording ritual chants

Documentation avoided commercial use or public dissemination of sacred knowledge without community approval.

Respect for indigenous intellectual property is essential in oral tradition research.

7. Solung Festival as Historical Archive

7.1 Introduction to Solung

The Solung festival is one of the most significant agricultural and socio-religious festivals of the Adi tribe. Celebrated primarily after the sowing of crops, Solung combines ritual worship, communal feasting, and elaborate chant recitation. While often described as an agricultural festival, Solung also functions as a major site of oral transmission and collective memory reinforcement.

Scholars of intangible cultural heritage in Arunachal Pradesh note that ritual festivals serve not only religious purposes but also act as repositories of traditional knowledge systems (Sarma, 2024). In the Adi context, Solung provides a structured space where myth, genealogy, ecology, and social norms converge in performative form.

7.2 Ritual Structure and Narrative Performance

Solung typically includes:

- Invocation of deities
- Sacrificial rituals
- Recitation of mythic narratives
- Agricultural blessings
- Communal participation

The central feature for historical analysis is the ritual chant recited by the Miri (ritual specialist). These chants often include:

- Cosmological origins
- Ancestral lineage
- Agricultural instruction
- Clan relationships
- Moral injunctions

Unlike casual storytelling, ritual chants follow a formalised sequence. The repetitive and formulaic structure enhances stability across generations. Jan Vansina (1985) emphasises that structured repetition in oral societies strengthens continuity of transmission. Thus, Solung chants are not improvised narratives but socially regulated recitations embedded in ritual authority.

7.3 Solung as Collective Memory Framework

Maurice Halbwachs (1992) argues that collective memory survives through social frameworks. Ritual provides such a framework by gathering community members in shared performance.

During Solung:

- Elders recall ancestral narratives.
- Younger generations observe ritual sequence.
- Community identity is publicly reaffirmed.

The performative setting reinforces shared understanding of origin and belonging.

Sanjib Baruah (2020) suggests that indigenous identity in frontier regions is shaped not only by external classification but also by internal ritual continuity. Solung serves precisely this internal function.

7.4 Ecological and Agricultural Knowledge

Solung chants contain references to:

- Crop cycles
- Seasonal timing
- Fertility symbols
- Animal sacrifice
- Environmental balance

Pandey, Adhiguru, and Riba (2021) demonstrate that traditional Adi practices encode ecological adaptation and environmental knowledge. Ritual invocation of agricultural prosperity reflects long-term agrarian continuity. Thus, Solung preserves ecological memory embedded in sacred language.

7.5 Social Organisation and Clan Structure

Participation in Solung is clan-based. Households contribute resources, animals, and labour. Ritual recitations often acknowledge specific clan lineages.

This reinforces:

- Clan hierarchy
- Kinship solidarity
- Inter-family reciprocity

Bouchery (2021) notes that Tani kinship terminology reflects structured lineage patterns. Ritual recitation during Solung reproduces these patterns publicly.

In this way, Solung functions as:

- Historical reaffirmation of clan identity
- Mechanism of intergenerational continuity
- Social integration platform

7.6 Solung as Indigenous Archive

Unlike written archives, ritual archives are embodied and performative. The archive exists in memory, voice, and repetition.

Applying Vansina's (1985) evaluative criteria:

- Transmission is socially regulated (through Miri).
- Narrative structure remains consistent.
- Ritual authority reinforces authenticity.
- Performance context stabilises meaning.

Therefore, Solung can be treated as a ritualised historical archive.

Table 4
Solung Festival as Historical Archive

Ritual Element	Cultural Function	Historical Interpretation
Miri chant	Sacred invocation	Structured ancestral memory
Clan participation	Social unity	Lineage continuity
Agricultural ritual	Fertility blessing	Agrarian history
Sacrifice	Ritual obligation	Cultural continuity
Public gathering	Identity reinforcement	Collective memory formation

7.7 Interpretation within Oral Historiography

Alessandro Portelli (1991) reminds historians that oral narratives convey social meaning rather than strict chronology. Solung chants may not record specific dates, but they preserve patterns of continuity.

From an ethno-historical perspective, Solung demonstrates that oral tradition operates through:

- Ritual repetition
- Community participation
- Symbolic reinforcement
- Intergenerational transmission

Thus, Solung is not merely a festival but a living historical institution.

8. Genealogy and Migration Reconstruction: Oral Narratives as Spatial History

8.1 Genealogy as Relative Chronology

Genealogical recitation is one of the most stable components of Adi oral tradition. During ritual ceremonies and clan deliberations, elders recount sequences of ancestors linking present families to foundational progenitors. These genealogies are not casual recollections; they are socially regulated narratives often performed in formal contexts.

Jan Vansina (1985) argues that genealogies in oral societies function as frameworks of relative chronology. While they do not provide exact calendar dates, generational sequencing allows historians to estimate temporal depth. For example, if an average generation spans approximately 25–30 years, a genealogy of 10–12 generations may indicate a memory depth of roughly 250–300 years. Although such estimation requires caution, it provides a methodological basis for interpreting oral lineage sequences.

In the Adi context, genealogical recitations frequently begin with Abotani or intermediate ancestral figures and move through named lineage holders to present clan members. Structural consistency across narrators enhances credibility. When multiple elders recount similar sequences with minor variation, the stability of core names suggests collective memory rather than individual invention.

8.2 Clan Structure and Territorial Legitimacy

Genealogy among the Adis is closely connected with land rights and social organisation. Clan affiliation determines access to agricultural land, participation in rituals, and dispute settlement within the Kebang system. Therefore, genealogical memory serves not merely as historical recall but as a mechanism of territorial legitimacy.

Bouchery (2021), in his linguistic study of Adi kinship terminology, demonstrates that kinship categories reflect structured lineage relations consistent across Tani-speaking groups. This linguistic evidence supports the reliability of genealogical frameworks preserved in oral recitation.

Thus, genealogy operates simultaneously at three levels:

- Social classification
- Political legitimacy
- Historical continuity

8.3 Migration Narratives and Spatial Memory

Migration stories are frequently embedded within genealogical accounts. Elders often recount that specific clans moved along particular river valleys or crossed certain hill tracts before settling in present locations.

Sanjib Baruah (2020) argues that indigenous spatial narratives should be treated as alternative cartographies that reflect lived geography rather than colonial mapping. In the Adi case, repeated references to rivers such as the Siang and its tributaries suggest memory of movement within specific ecological corridors.

Such narratives typically include:

- Movement due to conflict
- Search for fertile land
- Clan separation
- Marriage alliances across villages

Although exact dating remains absent, the consistency of geographical markers across oral accounts suggests structured spatial memory.

8.4 Correlation with Anthropological and Linguistic Evidence

Historical reconstruction becomes stronger when oral evidence is triangulated with anthropological data. Tani-speaking communities exhibit linguistic similarities indicating shared origin (Bouchery, 2021). These linguistic patterns support oral claims of common ancestry and migration.

Furthermore, anthropological studies of settlement patterns in Arunachal Pradesh indicate that hill communities often moved gradually along river systems in response to ecological and social factors. Such patterns align with migration narratives recounted in Adi oral tradition.

This convergence does not “prove” myth literally but strengthens the argument that oral narratives preserve historical patterns embedded in symbolic language.

Table 5
Genealogy as Historical Framework

Genealogical Element	Social Role	Historical Interpretation
Named ancestor	Clan legitimacy	Lineage continuity
Branching lineage	Clan differentiation	Migration or settlement division
River reference	Territorial identity	Spatial movement memory
Marriage alliance	Social integration	Inter-village connection
Generational depth	Temporal continuity	Approximate time span

8.6 Oral Cartography: Landscape as Memory

Migration stories frequently associate ancestors with rivers, hills, forests, and cultivation sites. These references create what may be termed “oral cartography.” Unlike colonial maps drawn from administrative surveys, oral cartography reflects relational geography embedded in memory.

Halbwachs (1992) argues that memory is spatially anchored. Collective memory often attaches itself to physical landmarks. In the Adi case, rivers such as the Siang function as mnemonic anchors linking narrative to landscape.

Thus, oral tradition preserves not only genealogy but also ecological geography.

8.7 Limitations and Interpretive Caution

While genealogical recitations provide valuable historical insight, several limitations must be acknowledged:

- Generational compression may occur.
- Symbolic ancestors may represent clan clusters rather than individuals.
- Migration stories may merge multiple events.

Therefore, oral narratives must be interpreted comparatively rather than literally. Triangulation with linguistic and anthropological evidence strengthens validity.

8.8 Analytical Interpretation

The analysis demonstrates that Adi genealogical and migration narratives function as structured historical memory. They preserve:

- Relative chronology
- Territorial movement
- Clan formation
- Ecological adaptation

When evaluated through Vansina’s methodological framework (1985) and supported by linguistic studies (Bouchery, 2021), these narratives contribute meaningfully to reconstruction of indigenous history. Rather than being dismissed as myth, genealogical recitations represent a dynamic archive of spatial and social continuity.

9. Oral Tradition, Memory, and Cultural Identity

9.1 Oral Tradition as Collective Identity Framework

Oral tradition among the Adis does not function merely as a record of the past; it actively constructs and sustains collective identity. Myths, ritual chants, genealogies, and migration stories are continuously performed within communal settings, ensuring that memory remains socially embedded.

Maurice Halbwachs (1992) argues that collective memory exists within social frameworks. Memory is not stored individually but maintained through shared practices, institutions, and rituals. In the Adi context, institutions such as the Kebang and festivals like Solung provide precisely such frameworks. Through repeated recitation, the community reaffirms common ancestry, territorial belonging, and moral norms.

Thus, oral tradition is not static preservation but dynamic reproduction of identity.

9.2 Myth and Ancestral Unity

The Abotani narrative serves as a unifying ancestral framework across Tani-speaking groups. Although sub-groups such as Minyong, Padam, and Pasi maintain distinct clan identities, shared reference to Abotani reinforces broader cultural cohesion.

Bouchery (2021) demonstrates structural continuity in kinship terminology across Adi sub-groups, supporting oral claims of common ancestry. Such linguistic consistency strengthens the argument that myth encodes historical relational memory.

Alessandro Portelli (1991) emphasises that oral narratives communicate social meaning. In the Adi case, the significance of Abotani lies not in literal verification but in symbolic affirmation of shared origin. The myth becomes a foundational identity narrative.

9.3 Ritual Performance and Identity Reinforcement

Ritual acts as a mechanism of identity reinforcement. During Solung festival, collective participation in chant recitation and sacrificial rituals creates a shared experiential memory.

Sarma (2024) observes that intangible cultural heritage practices in Arunachal Pradesh continue to function as markers of indigenous identity despite modernisation pressures. Ritual performance strengthens intergenerational continuity.

Through performance:

- Elders transmit knowledge.
- Youth observe and internalise narrative structure.
- Clan identity is publicly reaffirmed.

Therefore, ritual is both historical transmission and identity construction.

9.4 Spatial Memory and Territorial Identity

Migration stories and genealogical recitations anchor identity within specific landscapes. Rivers, hills, and cultivation sites mentioned in oral narratives function as mnemonic anchors.

Baruah (2020) notes that frontier identities are often shaped through territorial narratives. In the Adi case, spatial memory preserved in oral tradition reinforces claims to land and historical belonging.

Thus, oral cartography contributes to territorial identity.

9.5 Oral Tradition and Response to External Classification

Colonial administrators frequently referred to the Adis as “Abors,” a term later rejected in favour of the self-designation “Adi.” Baruah (2020) argues that colonial knowledge production shaped ethnic categorisation in Northeast India.

In response, oral tradition plays a role in asserting internal identity markers. By continuously invoking Abotani ancestry and clan continuity, Adi oral narratives counter externally imposed labels.

Thus, oral tradition becomes a medium of cultural resilience.

9.6 Intergenerational Continuity and Transformation

Although oral tradition emphasises continuity, it is not immune to change. Memory adapts to contemporary social realities. Halbwachs (1992) suggests that collective memory is reshaped by present concerns.

In the Adi context:

- Christian conversion in some areas
- Expansion of formal education
- Urban migration

have altered patterns of transmission. Yet ritual and narrative remain important identity anchors.

Pandey, Adhiguru, and Riba (2021) highlight the tension between preservation and transformation in indigenous knowledge systems under globalisation.

Oral tradition thus operates in a dynamic equilibrium between continuity and adaptation.

Table 6
Oral Tradition and Identity Formation

Oral Component	Identity Function	Theoretical Basis
Abotani myth	Ancestral unity	Portelli (1991)
Genealogy	Clan legitimacy	Vansina (1985)

Ritual performance	Collective memory	Halbwachs (1992)
Migration narrative	Territorial belonging	Baruah (2020)
Ecological chant	Cultural continuity	Pandey et al. (2021)

9.7 Analytical Synthesis

The analysis demonstrates that oral tradition among the Adis functions at multiple interconnected levels:

- Historical memory
- Social regulation
- Territorial legitimation
- Cultural continuity
- Identity affirmation

Rather than being confined to mythological imagination, oral narratives serve as living archives that connect past, present, and future. By integrating Vansina’s methodological framework (1985), Portelli’s interpretive oral history approach (1991), and contemporary Northeast scholarship (Baruah, 2020; Bouchery, 2021; Sarma, 2024), it becomes clear that Adi oral tradition constitutes a structured indigenous historiography.

It is therefore both historically informative and culturally foundational.

9. Oral Tradition, Memory, and Cultural Identity

9.1 Oral Tradition as Collective Identity Framework

Oral tradition among the Adis does not function merely as a record of the past; it actively constructs and sustains collective identity. Myths, ritual chants, genealogies, and migration stories are continuously performed within communal settings, ensuring that memory remains socially embedded.

Maurice Halbwachs (1992) argues that collective memory exists within social frameworks. Memory is not stored individually but maintained through shared practices, institutions, and rituals. In the Adi context, institutions such as the *Kebang* and festivals like *Solung* provide precisely such frameworks. Through repeated recitation, the community reaffirms common ancestry, territorial belonging, and moral norms.

Thus, oral tradition is not static preservation but dynamic reproduction of identity.

9.2 Myth and Ancestral Unity

The Abotani narrative serves as a unifying ancestral framework across Tani-speaking groups. Although sub-groups such as *Minyong*, *Padam*, and *Pasi* maintain distinct clan identities, shared reference to Abotani reinforces broader cultural cohesion.

Bouchery (2021) demonstrates structural continuity in kinship terminology across Adi sub-groups, supporting oral claims of common ancestry. Such linguistic consistency strengthens the argument that myth encodes historical relational memory.

Alessandro Portelli (1991) emphasises that oral narratives communicate social meaning. In the Adi case, the significance of Abotani lies not in literal verification but in symbolic affirmation of shared origin. The myth becomes a foundational identity narrative.

9.3 Ritual Performance and Identity Reinforcement

Ritual acts as a mechanism of identity reinforcement. During *Solung* festival, collective participation in chant recitation and sacrificial rituals creates a shared experiential memory.

Sarma (2024) observes that intangible cultural heritage practices in Arunachal Pradesh continue to function as markers of indigenous identity despite modernisation pressures. Ritual performance strengthens intergenerational continuity.

Through performance:

- Elders transmit knowledge.
- Youth observe and internalise narrative structure.
- Clan identity is publicly reaffirmed.

Therefore, ritual is both historical transmission and identity construction.

9.4 Spatial Memory and Territorial Identity

Migration stories and genealogical recitations anchor identity within specific landscapes. Rivers, hills, and cultivation sites mentioned in oral narratives function as mnemonic anchors.

Baruah (2020) notes that frontier identities are often shaped through territorial narratives. In the Adi case, spatial memory preserved in oral tradition reinforces claims to land and historical belonging.

Thus, oral cartography contributes to territorial identity.

9.5 Oral Tradition and Response to External Classification

Colonial administrators frequently referred to the Adis as “Abors,” a term later rejected in favour of the self-designation “Adi.” Baruah (2020) argues that colonial knowledge production shaped ethnic categorisation in Northeast India.

In response, oral tradition plays a role in asserting internal identity markers. By continuously invoking Abotani ancestry and clan continuity, Adi oral narratives counter externally imposed labels.

Thus, oral tradition becomes a medium of cultural resilience.

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10. Documentation Challenges and Contemporary Risks

10.1 The Problem of Fixing Oral Narratives in Written Form

One of the central challenges in studying Adi oral tradition lies in the act of documentation itself. Oral narratives are dynamic, performative, and context-dependent. When transcribed into written form, they risk losing tone, rhythm, repetition, and performative nuance. Jan Vansina (1985) emphasises that oral traditions derive meaning from performance context. Removing narratives from ritual settings may alter their interpretive depth. In the Adi case, chants recited during Solung festival are embedded within sacrificial rituals, communal gathering, and sacred space. Writing them down as text may preserve content but not experiential meaning.

Alessandro Portelli (1991) further argues that oral narratives communicate emotional and symbolic truth through voice modulation and storytelling style. Transcription cannot fully capture these dimensions.

Thus, documentation must remain aware that written representation is only partial preservation.

10.2 Generational Shift and Decline in Oral Transmission

Rapid socio-economic transformation in Arunachal Pradesh has influenced patterns of oral transmission. Formal education systems prioritise written knowledge, reducing opportunities for traditional storytelling.

Sarma (2024) observes that intangible cultural heritage practices are increasingly vulnerable due to generational shifts. Younger members may possess limited knowledge of extended genealogical recitations compared to elders. Pandey, Adhiguru, and Riba (2021) similarly highlight the erosion of traditional artefacts and ritual knowledge under globalisation pressures. While rituals such as Solung continue, the depth of narrative memory may be gradually shrinking.

This generational transition poses a risk of knowledge discontinuity.

10.3 Religious Transformation and Cultural Adaptation

Religious transformation, including the spread of Christianity in some Adi areas, has influenced ritual practice patterns. In certain villages, traditional rituals may be reduced or reinterpreted. However, transformation does not necessarily imply disappearance. Oral narratives may adapt to new frameworks. Halbwachs (1992) argues that collective memory evolves in response to contemporary contexts. Therefore, cultural adaptation must be understood as dynamic restructuring rather than simple decline.

The challenge lies in documenting change without framing it as cultural loss in simplistic terms.

10.4 Urban Migration and Fragmentation of Community Space

Urban migration and employment mobility have altered village-based community structures. Younger generations working in towns may participate less frequently in ritual gatherings. Since oral tradition depends on communal setting, reduced participation may weaken intergenerational transmission. Baruah (2020) notes that frontier regions undergoing integration into national development frameworks often experience identity transformation alongside economic change.

Thus, migration affects not only livelihood patterns but also memory structures.

10.5 Digital Documentation: Opportunity and Risk

Digital recording technologies offer new possibilities for preservation. Audio and video recordings can capture tone, gesture, and performative detail more effectively than written transcription.

However, digital documentation introduces ethical and interpretive concerns:

- Who controls recorded material?
- Is sacred knowledge being publicly circulated?
- Does digital context alter ritual meaning?

Indigenous intellectual property must be respected. Documentation should involve community consent and participation.

10.6 Methodological Limitations

Several methodological challenges must also be acknowledged:

- Narrative variation across villages
- Memory compression in genealogical recitations
- Symbolic representation mistaken for empirical event
- Researcher bias in translation

Vansina (1985) cautions that oral traditions must be critically evaluated rather than accepted uncritically. Triangulation with linguistic and anthropological evidence strengthens interpretation.

Table 7
Challenges in Oral Tradition Documentation

Challenge	Nature of Risk	Mitigation Strategy
Transcription loss	Performance nuance lost	Audio-video recording
Generational decline	Knowledge discontinuity	Early documentation
Religious change	Ritual reduction	Comparative study
Urban migration	Reduced participation	Community workshops
Research bias	Misinterpretation	Triangulation & peer review

10.7 Analytical Interpretation

The challenges discussed do not invalidate oral tradition as historical source. Instead, they highlight the need for methodological sensitivity.

Oral tradition among the Adis remains resilient but vulnerable. Its survival depends on:

- Community participation
- Cultural adaptation
- Ethical documentation
- Academic recognition

Rather than romanticising oral knowledge as static heritage, it must be understood as dynamic cultural process shaped by contemporary realities.

11. Conclusion

The reconstruction of Adi history through oral tradition challenges conventional hierarchies of historical knowledge. This study has demonstrated that oral narratives among the Adi tribe are not peripheral folklore but structured systems of collective memory embedded in ritual, genealogy, and social organisation. By analysing Abotani origin myths, Solung festival chants, genealogical recitations, and migration stories, the paper has shown that oral tradition preserves layered historical consciousness rather than literal chronological record.

The central research problem addressed whether oral tradition can be treated as a legitimate historical source. Drawing upon the methodological framework of Jan Vansina (1985), this study affirms that oral narratives, when critically evaluated, provide reliable insight into lineage continuity, spatial movement, ecological adaptation, and social regulation. Genealogical recitations function as relative chronology; migration narratives encode territorial memory; ritual chants preserve ecological knowledge; and mythic ancestry reinforces clan identity. Alessandro Portelli's (1991) insight that oral narratives communicate meaning rather than strict factual chronology has proven particularly relevant in interpreting Abotani mythology. The significance of Abotani lies not in empirical verification but in his role as an ancestral archetype linking kinship, land, and moral codes. Thus, myth and history are not mutually exclusive categories but overlapping modes of historical expression.

Maurice Halbwachs' (1992) concept of collective memory further illuminates how oral tradition operates within social frameworks. In the Adi context, institutions such as the Kebang and festivals like Solung provide structured settings for the reproduction of memory. Through repeated performance, the community sustains intergenerational continuity while adapting to contemporary change. The analysis of genealogy and migration narratives has demonstrated that oral tradition preserves spatial history. Repeated references to rivers, hills, and settlement sites constitute a form of indigenous cartography. When triangulated with linguistic evidence (Bouchery, 2021) and anthropological research, these narratives contribute meaningfully to reconstruction of indigenous past.

At the same time, the study has acknowledged contemporary challenges. Modern education, urban migration, religious transformation, and digital mediation influence patterns of oral transmission. However, transformation should not be equated with disappearance. Oral tradition among the Adis remains resilient precisely because it is dynamic rather than static. The broader historiographical contribution of this study lies in its argument for epistemological inclusion. Histories of Northeast India have often relied heavily on colonial archives. While such records remain important, exclusive reliance on them reproduces external

perspectives. Incorporating oral tradition as legitimate historical material allows reconstruction of indigenous history from within the community's own epistemological framework. Thus, the case of the Adi tribe demonstrates that oral tradition constitutes an indigenous historiography embedded in performance, kinship, and landscape. Recognising its historical value enriches not only regional history but also broader debates on memory, identity, and methodology.

Ultimately, this study affirms that oral tradition is neither mere myth nor substitute archive; it is a parallel archive — dynamic, performative, and socially grounded — through which the Adi community continues to narrate its past and shape its cultural identity.

Acknowledgement

The author expresses sincere gratitude to the elders and ritual specialists of the Adi community who generously shared their oral narratives, genealogical knowledge, and ritual insights during the course of this study. Their willingness to transmit traditional knowledge made this research possible. The author also acknowledges the guidance and academic support received from the Department of History, whose intellectual environment contributed significantly to the development of this research framework. Constructive discussions with faculty members and peers helped refine the theoretical and methodological approach of the study. Appreciation is extended to scholars whose works on oral historiography, indigenous knowledge systems, and Northeast Indian history provided the conceptual foundation for this research. Their contributions have been invaluable in shaping a more inclusive understanding of indigenous historical reconstruction. Finally, the author remains grateful to family members and well-wishers for their continuous encouragement and support throughout the preparation of this manuscript.

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