

# Indigenous Religious Practices without Written Records: Challenges and Methods in Reconstructing Adi Religious History

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## Abstract

*Arunachal Pradesh the "land of the rising sun" is a breathtaking collage of cultural richness and home to over 110 tribes. Among them, the Adi tribe stands out for its deep eco-spirituality. A time honored bond with nature where the divine is intricately woven into the natural world. This sacred worldview expressed through rich oral traditions, myths and rituals, underscores a deep commitment to preserving the environment. It is a reflection of their enduring ecological stewardship passed down through generations. The Adi ethnic community in Arunachal Pradesh has a rich cultural history. It is sustained in harmony with the environment, ancestry and worship of deities represented by Donyi-Polo who denotes the sun and the moon. At the centre of the Adi religion is the culture of worship of the Donyi Polo who is believed to embody powers that create and sustain life. This belief maintain the universe in equilibrium and uphold morality. The Adi society has no writing systems to explicate their belief systems and codify their age old practices. They have no worry about being taken over by the outside society. External factors have also come into policies of preservation. So there exists an oral sacred knowledge possessed by nearly all the Adis about every aspect of practice which is also under some threat owing to modernity. This absence of written materials has considerably hampered efforts to rehabilitate the complete picture of Adi sectarian history. Therefore the practitioners of faith, culturalists and even the descendants of the previous age have had to be resourceful and careful in seeking ways of recording and understanding their own skies and world. This particular paper presents these problems and also shows some of the artistic ways to protect Adi's spirituality in order that it is passed on to the younger generations.*

**Keywords:** Adi Tribe, Arunachal Pradesh, Spiritual Tradition, Donyi-Polo, Oral Tradition, Eco Spirituality, Ancestral Reverence

The treasure of deep spiritual heritage in the culture exists as the Adi tribes of Arunachal Pradesh have been in harmony with nature and respectful for the wisdom of their elders and the deities of Donyi Polo, a symbol of the sun and moon. Donyi-Polo is not only a religious figure in Adi spirituality but the very embodiment of life,

cosmic balance and integrity in moral gesture. It is that force which holds all of them together in daily life and binds them to this vast universe. For the Adi, Donyi (Sun) and Polo (Moon) are not far off celestial objects, but are powerful aspects saturated with spirit and meaning. It represents life's dualities and reflecting their worldview's intrinsic balance.

For the Adi tribe, a deep understanding of nature based on their eco-spiritual beliefs forms the cornerstone of shaping their way of living. These beliefs-directing activities in all they do, from how they farm and hunt to how they perform their rituals-have to do with seeing divine presence in everything within the natural world. Thus, one must ask with modern influence increasingly affecting their traditional way of living: How do these eco-spiritual beliefs survive, change, or even fade? Such fragile equipoise between the ancient spiritual values and the drift of modern life needs to be explored to understand how the Adi people continue to interact with this world. Their eco-spiritual beliefs are not anything but tradition; they are what sticks the Adi tribe all together. These express social norms, determine community roles, and are at the heart of collective rituals which hold the community together and strong. But with the modern world claiming this territory, it comes to be a disconcerting task to maintain these beliefs. Such are not relics of a bygone culture but parts living and breathing to the Adi identity. The preservation or adaptation of these beliefs in a rapidly changing world is critical to ensuring that the cultural identity of the tribe is not erased. The approach of the Adi tribe toward sustainability runs parallel to its approach to nature.

But these approaches are at the mercy of the modernistic changes that are eroding the traditional ways. These pose questions on how these practices are evolving and whether these can still conserve as much ecological balance as they once had. There is a risk that these practices may be lost or totally changed beyond recognition and this raises several important questions about the future of the role the Adi tribe plays in stewarding their environment. Eco-spiritual practices pass down from generation to the next and rely on oral traditions, storytelling and active participation in rituals. These techniques had always been effective, but they are increasingly threatened by the agents of modernization. To what extent these traditions are coping with the modern pressures and whether new practices have emerged as a natural result is something that needs careful consideration. It is fundamentally important to save the tradition of the Adi people and their belief system for cultural survival and its far reaching effects on the scope of environmental conservation efforts. These beliefs are valuable examples and practices that can enrich modern ecological practice.

These practices ensure their existence and contribution towards the global vision of conserving nature. There is a realization towards observance and assimilation of indigenous knowledge in the approach to the issue of the environment. Their work with the Adi community is the evidence of just how finely balanced their human and nature relationship is. Their deeply ingrained daily practices of eco-spirituality offer a mighty lesson for how we ourselves could approach global conservation. The researcher should learn about the traditions of the Adi tribe and how then those applied to ecological challenges of today. This way the wisdom of the Adi people may be preserved and introduced to modern conservation measures, ensuring that their knowledge takes precedence over our approach to sustainability. At the center of the Adi world of belief there lies a vibrant array of convictions and rituals. All those were carefully passed down across generations solely by oral tradition. Unlike religious practices that have been accounted for in holy scriptures or codified doctrines for centuries, the Adi people's sacred knowledge is kept alive in the memories of the elders, in the songs of ceremonial leaders and in the rich array of stories interwoven into life.

This oral tradition dependence is deep but positions their heritage considerably at risk. Especially since modernization and the impact of external cultures bear down on their way of life. In the absence of written records, today proving to be a formidable challenge in preserving their spiritual heritage is more important to scholars, community members and cultural practitioners alike to find

new and culturally sensitive ways to record and preserve this precious heritage. The Adi people of Arunachal Pradesh belong to the traditional belief system of Donyi-Polo, which forms the very core of culture and society. The term “Donyi” represents the sun and “Polo” represents the moon. The Adi deity whom they consider as the creator, planner and preserver of the universe has ultimately been represented by Donyi-Polo. He is expected to be omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient, controlling all affairs of this world and the nature surrounding it.

The Adis believe that Donyi-Polo’s existence is seen in many myths and practical proofs. They believe that the supreme being brings order and justice to the world. According to their belief, Donyi-Polo is said to watch every one of the living things, making sure that any wrong doing does find its corresponding punishment. This belief has thus led to a society in which thefts, violence and dishonesty happen very seldom. Traditionally, in Adi society a concept of locking home or granary did not exist. Whatever valuable items are recovered are declared to public so that the rightful owner can collect. Based on this rationale, Donyi-Polo and other symbolic rituals chased away every disturbance and that led to peaceful and harmonious community. The Donyi-Polo worship in Adi culture is not only ritualistic, but every form of living through all aspects of their ideas of the world and relations among themselves and with nature. In the world view of the Adi, Donyi-Polo, the golden sun sets as a kind of moral force on the shoulders of human beings forcing truth and justice and respect for the natural order.

However, this essence cannot be easily captured. Since oral traditions are fluid by nature and subtly shift each time. There are shared stories, songs and chants underpinning Adi religion and also it change with each generation. This enriching process does mean, the full depths and scope of Adi religious history remain vulnerable to erosion because younger generations move away from earlier traditional practices or reinterpret those within the modern context.

The rituals form an essential part of their cultural identity and they are on the belief that evil omens will follow failure to perform proper puja to these deities. Some of the important rituals and symbols of Donyi-Polo faith are Mithun Sacrifice. The mithun, a large bovine, has been looked at as a sacred animal and an immediate embodiment agent of Donyi-Polo. In rituals for disputing settlements, the animal was used as a testifier to prove the truth and fairness. And with its killing, society could then submit to the care of Donyi-Polo to maintain orderly society. The Rogum ritual is a cleansing ceremony conducted by the Ayit Miri or soul priest to cleanse individuals affected by bad omens and dreams. Adi beliefs give great importance to dreams as temporary souls wander as well as warnings from spirits about future calamity.

To overcome such omens, a family approaches the Ayit Miri for payment with symbolic items like silver plates and precious beads. The priest attired in threads of Riddin and Tadok beads, boldly embarks on the soul’s journey to confront spirits. A ritual space, sometimes located outside of the village is prepared where sacrifices of animals are held in order to restore health and eliminate negative influences. Whether it is spirits threatening the crops or evil forces, dreams compel the Adis to build protective symbols and offerings. Animals in the form of dog, snake and tiger play highly important roles in Adi belief systems. It is said that the dog was a representative of man. It is also said that the snake is the penance of those violators of social norms, especially in matters during festivals and truthful judgments. The tiger is the epitome of justice that Donyi-Polo is manifesting when he attacks people with violent tendencies or sinful and bad practices.

Even the religious ritual of Uyu Biya Sinam, in which uyu means evil spirits and Biya Sinam means demands by unknown forces, betrays deep interaction with the super natural when sickness has been pronounced. On such occasions, animals are sacrificed by miri priests representing the Adis to keep in line with these forces not to appease them. Animal sacrifice has no place in their religious rites. Instead, animals like mithun, cows and pigs are sacrificed based on signs revealed through

Ayin Kana or liver divination or Lime Mona or stone divination. However, some benevolent gods, like Gumin-Hoyin, Pidem-Yodang, and Agung-Agam, keep the people safe without demanding sacrifice a privilege that only affluent families enjoy.

The Adis, living among towering mountains, unforgiving storms and untamed wild, nurtured deep respect for supernatural forces as they sought security amidst nature's might. There was the legacy in each generation to make offerings for health, prosperity and protection. Such rituals invite these spirits to heal illness and sacrifices are offered not just for good fortune but also to aid in warding off people from suffering and disease. Some rituals look for revenge or against magic as Tibetan influences brought stories of avenging spirits born from slighted magicians during lifetime.

These sacrifices exemplify the Adis' continued belief in the unseen companion in survival, healing and balance. Epak, and Motum-Moyeng are two rituals done to invoke blessings from Donyi-Polo. These rituals are connected very deeply with the agricultural cycles and the community's relationship with nature. They are performed with the assumption that the religious power of Donyi-Polo guarantees harmony, prosperity and well-being. Adi religious practices vary by region, thereby making any single narrative challenging to compile. Unlike more institutionalized religions, which postulate off a dominant written text, Adi beliefs are not centralized and are multi-layered in nature. The meaning of Donyi-Polo or details of some of the practices would vary in other societies but these differences both add complexity and depth to the continuation of their culture. Some villages might perform Motum-Moyeng, the ritual sacrifice of an animal done near the gate of the village to appease evil spirits, and others may have a unique practice best for them.

Such diversity makes it hard to record the unified spiritual history of the Adi since every version is a manifestation of the spirit and nature of the community that practices it. The contextual nature of most of their rituals adds to the challenge of preserving the religious history of the Adis. Adi rites are often conducted in respect to specific needs that arise within a community, making meaning thereby both deep and personal and highly relevant to their immediate cultural context. Their practices are tied up with the interpretation of the world by the community in which they exist, wherein spiritual and ordinary grumble together with the resulting result, highly difficult to be transferred into text without losing the subtle, situational nuances that give such practices their meanings. Despite such complexities, the Adi people backed by dedicated scholars and practitioners, have encouraged a lot of new strategies to preserve their spiritual heritage.

Ethnographic field research, one of the bedrocks of anthropology, allows the researchers to meet at considerable length with Adi elders, ceremonial leaders and members of the communities, whereby they can tape oral histories that fill a treasure trove of Adi beliefs. In interviews, researchers get both the facts and the emotion, expression and stories that add richness to the spirituality of the Adi. In the Riddin Punam ritual, sacred threads are tied to people that can be recorded not only in terms of what it involves but also in terms of what elders say it means. That is, it reflects traditions of countless generations of learning and adaptation.

Audiovisual documentation maintains the best possible record of Adi practices in the sounds, movements and atmosphere of rituals like Ipak. They provide an experience to generations yet to come about the rituals, even as those rituals evolve over time. Participatory research enables the Adi community to take charge of preserving their own culture. Through cross-generational synergies, not only will the younger Adis acquire technical skills but also spiritual legacy, thereby boosting cultural pride and continuance.

Symbolic interpretation will enable the understanding of Adi worldview by extracting the deep meanings behind symbols, rituals and objects partook the fundamental Adi philosophy of harmony with nature and cosmic order. Globally, the experience of the Adi tribe corresponds to many indigenous communities efforts to protect their heritage. For instance, in New Zealand, Maori

people have collaborated with researchers in creating digital archives that would protect their oral histories and ceremonial practices while making them accessible to younger generations. For the Adi, the institution of cultural centers or digital archives in Arunachal Pradesh will hold this same with great importance and it will preserve cultural pride amidst alterations made to suit current needs. In brief, without leaving behind a single document, the religious history of the Adi is a task greatly deep rooted in works.

A bridge was constructed through ethnographic research, audiovisual recording, a community led project, symbolic interpretation and digital archiving. It involves the Adi people allowing the spiritual heritage to be very much alive as a living tradition that connects past and future. But these preservation efforts not only help rebuild religious history but also contribute to a wider understanding of the importance of oral traditions, nature reverence and cultural resilience. Honoring the sacred heritage of Adi people affirms a timeless connection to the divine natural world, and to the ancestors who first wove these beliefs into their community's identity, which will continue shaping their place in the world for generations to come.

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