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CONSTRUCTION OF HISTORY THROUGH ORAL GENEALOGIES

Dr. Divya Joshi

Department of English, Govt. Dungar College, Bikaner

Abstract

The construction of history through the oral tradition of genealogy is a fascinating and complex process, particularly significant in societies where written records are sparse or absent. This method involves passing down historical knowledge, cultural practices, and lineage information from one generation to the next through spoken word, often in the form of stories, songs, or recitations. Oral history and genealogies are closely intertwined, both serving as methods for preserving and transmitting the history, identity, and heritage of individuals, families, and communities. Genealogies are crucial for maintaining the memory of family lineages, often serving as a basis for claims to land, leadership, or social status. In many cultures, reciting one's genealogy is a way to assert identity and establish connections to ancestors. This tradition helps to sustain cultural continuity, ensuring that the values, beliefs, and historical experiences of a community are transmitted across generations. It often intertwines with myth, legend, and collective memory, blending historical facts with cultural narratives. This paper attempts to explore the genealogical tradition prevalent across cultures and the Indian subcontinent. It also discusses how the tradition evokes the sense of continuity and collective memory.

Key words: Genealogy, history, indigenous, memory, oral traditions

Indigenous people have their own ways of thinking about, practicing and defining oral history. You learn this when you are immersed in native worlds, as you breathe in the stories, sing the songs, speak the language, and soak in the politics and protocols. If you pay attention in these spaces, oral history is all around you, evident in the people, art, traditions, environments, and genealogies that speak to inherited experiences. (Mehuika 01)

Indigenous peoples continue to strengthen and share genealogical knowledge, using it to tell stories, honor both traditional and contemporary values, and serve as vital cultural frameworks that shape our collective identities, both past and present. There exists an innate desire for community and continuity in humans and this induces people to situate themselves within a temporal framework defined by narrative histories. Each society has its unique methods for preserving memories of the past. Across different eras and cultures, people find meaning by navigating experiences of continuity and change. The statement recognizes that memory preservation is a universal human endeavor, yet it is carried out in distinct ways across different cultures and historical periods. Many societies, especially those without written language or formal historical records, rely heavily on oral traditions such as storytelling, songs, and proverbs to transmit history and cultural knowledge. This method is dynamic, allowing for the adaptation of narratives to suit contemporary contexts. Cultural rituals, festivals, and ceremonies often serve as living reenactments of historical events or myths, embedding memory into the collective consciousness through repeated practice. Societies also preserve memories through physical means such as monuments, architecture, art, and artifacts. These tangible representations of history often serve as focal points for collective memory and identity. Societies may emphasize continuity through the preservation of long-standing traditions, languages, and customs, which help to reinforce a sense of collective identity. Societies also experience significant change, whether due to external influences such as colonization, migration, or technological advancements, or internal factors like social movements and political shifts. These changes can alter how societies remember the past, leading to the reinterpretation or revision of historical narratives. By examining how different societies preserve memories of the past and how these practices reflect experiences of continuity and change, we can gain a deeper understanding of how collective identities are formed, maintained, and transformed over time. Oral history, as a key method of preserving cultural memory, offers unique insights into the lived experiences of individuals and communities, allowing us to trace how stories, values, and identities are passed down and adapted across generations. According to Vansina:



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The sources of oral history are reminiscences, heresy or eyewitness accounts about events and situations which are contemporary, that is, which occurred during the lifetime of the informants. This differs from oral traditions in that oral traditions are no longer contemporary. They have passed from mouth to mouth, for a period beyond the lifetime of informants....as messages are transmitted beyond the generation that gave rise to them, they become oral traditions (12-13).

The construction of history through the oral tradition of genealogy is a fascinating and complex process, particularly significant in societies where written records are sparse or absent. This method involves passing down historical knowledge, cultural practices, and lineage information from one generation to the next through spoken word, often in the form of stories, songs, or recitations. Oral history and genealogies are closely intertwined, both serving as methods for preserving and transmitting the history, identity, and heritage of individuals, families, and communities. Genealogies are crucial for maintaining the memory of family lineages, often serving as a basis for claims to land, leadership, or social status. In many cultures, reciting one's genealogy is a way to assert identity and establish connections to ancestors. This tradition helps to sustain cultural continuity, ensuring that the values, beliefs, and historical experiences of a community are transmitted across generations. It often intertwines with myth, legend, and collective memory, blending historical facts with cultural narratives. Oral genealogies are dynamic; they can be adapted to changing social or political contexts. Unlike written records, they allow for reinterpretation and modification, which can be both a strength (allowing relevance) and a challenge (risking distortion).

The individuals responsible for maintaining and reciting these genealogies, such as griots in West Africa or tohunga in Polynesia, are often highly respected figures. Their role is crucial in preserving the accuracy and integrity of the genealogical record. In Polynesian cultures, genealogies (whakapapa in Māori) are vital for understanding one's place in the world and the connection to land, ancestors, and gods. These genealogies are often recited in ceremonial contexts and are considered sacred. In many African societies, griots serve as the keepers of oral histories, including genealogies. These histories can cover vast spans of time and are essential for maintaining the continuity of tribal identities and leadership structures. In Celtic traditions, genealogies were often memorized by bards and poets, who played a crucial role in preserving the histories and lineage of noble families. European genealogical traditions have been shaped by a mix of oral history and written records. In many European societies, nobility and royalty maintained extensive genealogical records to assert claims to power and inheritance. In countries like Scotland and Ireland, clans have preserved their genealogies through both oral traditions and written documents, often recorded in family bibles or parish registers. The medieval practice of heraldry also played a significant role in tracing lineages and establishing family identities. Among the Indigenous peoples of the Americas, genealogical traditions are closely linked to their spiritual and cultural beliefs. Many Indigenous communities view genealogy as a connection to the land and the cosmos, with ancestors playing a vital role in the community's spiritual life. The Navajo, for example, have a matrilineal system where clan membership and lineage are passed down through the mother's side, reinforcing the importance of maternal ancestry in social and cultural structures.

In the Middle East, genealogical traditions are often tied to religious and tribal affiliations. In Arab culture, lineage is of paramount importance, with genealogical records being meticulously maintained to trace one's ancestry back to significant tribal leaders or even to the Prophet Muhammad. These records, known as 'nasab', are vital for establishing identity, social status, and tribal connections, often determining marriage alliances and leadership roles within the community. In Asia, genealogical traditions are often meticulously documented. In China, the practice of recording family histories in genealogical books, or 'zupu', dates back thousands of years. These records, which can span hundreds of generations, are essential for understanding familial ties and honoring ancestors.

Genealogy in India has ancient origins, with roots tracing back to the Vedic period. The Rigveda, one of the oldest sacred texts, contains references to the *gotra* system, which signifies the lineage or clan one belongs to. *Gotras* are patrilineal in nature and are used to trace descent from a common ancestor, often a revered sage or rishi. This system plays a crucial role in determining marriage alliances, as individuals from the same *gotra* are traditionally not allowed to marry,



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maintaining the integrity of family lines. In many parts of India, professional genealogists, often referred to as 'Bhat', 'Panda', or 'Charan', have historically maintained detailed records of family lineages. These genealogists are responsible for documenting births, deaths, and marriages, and their records can span several centuries. For instance, in the states of Rajasthan and Gujarat, the Charans and Bhats have served as the custodians of genealogical data for Rajput and other noble families. Their records, known as *vanshavalis*, owned and maintained by families themselves are often written on scrolls and are considered highly authoritative. These records were traditionally updated by genealogists who visited the household to make new entries. *Vanshavalis* that have survived are typically associated with prominent families, such as local rulers or significant landholders. Compared to *pidhiavalis*, *vanshavalis* tend to be more detailed, not only listing the names of ancestors going back to the clan founders or the immediate founders of a particular lineage but also including descriptions of important events during the lives of family members. These descriptions often consist of oral traditions recorded in prose, recounting the exploits of distant ancestors, and brief biographical sketches providing information on land grants, battles, or service to local rulers by more recent family members. Both *pidhiavalis* and *vanshavalis* are written records of genealogies, capturing the lineage and history of families.

In the holy city of Haridwar, a significant genealogical tradition is maintained by the 'Pandas', who are hereditary priests and custodians of *Vahis*—ancient genealogical registers that record the family histories of pilgrims. These records are invaluable, providing a continuous link between the present generation and their ancestors. Genealogical traditions in India are deeply intertwined with religious practices and places. For example, during the *Pind Daan* ceremony, a ritual performed for the departed souls, Hindus often refer to their genealogical records to ensure that the correct ancestral lineage is honored. This practice underscores the belief in the ongoing connection between the living and their ancestors. In South India, the Namboodiri Brahmins of Kerala have a tradition known as *Annavarshi*, where detailed genealogical charts are maintained to trace the lineage of each family within the community. These records are critical for performing religious rituals that require precise knowledge of one's ancestry. In Indian cultural tradition, pilgrimage has long been regarded as a vital religious duty. Numerous sacred sites, including temples, rivers, mountains, and seas, serve as focal points for these pilgrimages, where rituals are performed under the guidance of *teerth purohits*. At some of these sites, there is a longstanding tradition of recording the details of pilgrims during their visits. These records, known by different names in various regions, have been meticulously maintained for centuries and continue to exist as a living tradition. The enduring nature of this system highlights its significant importance within the tradition. *Teerth* genealogies are being recorded and kept by the Brahmin pandas in different pilgrim centres of India. Haridwar, Kurukshetra and Puri are the most famous centres where we find these traditions (Chakrabarty 177). These pilgrim records contain detailed information about pilgrims, organized by generations and family lineage. Typically, a particular priest would maintain the records of a specific lineage or family, and after his death, his descendants would continue this practice. This process reflects a continuous interaction between the successive generations of both the priests and the pilgrims, fostering a sacred and ritualistic relationship akin to the *jajmani* system in Indian society. Such intergenerational interactions keep the records up to date. Over time, these records evolve into genealogical documents, allowing anyone to trace the family tree or pedigree of a particular family.

In the Jagannath temple, this tradition is known as *warja* or *warija*. The upkeep of the *warja* is an integral part of temple services, and a specific group of pandas, particularly the pratihari pandas, are responsible for this task. These pandas, also known as *jatri-pandas*, traditionally served as family priests to pilgrims (jatri). In earlier times, they even received copper plates designating them as the family priests of specific royal households from various regions across the subcontinent. At the Kamakhya temple in Assam, these records are maintained by Brahmin servitors known as Pandas, as well as Bardeoris and Nanandeoris. The record book here is called *jatrik khata*. These Brahmins claim descent from families brought to this sacred site by the Ahom kings from Kannauj, Mithila, and Bengal, who were given lands to settle and perform rituals.

In central and northern Gujarat, a distinct group of genealogists called *Vahivanca Barots* emerged from the Bhat community. These *Vahivanca Barots* maintained written records, with *Vahivanca* literally meaning "one who reads a bahi or vahi" (ledger). The oldest book consulted by Shah and Shroff dates back to 1740 CE, yet they also found a genealogy



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that documents events from 1234 CE. Although the language of the document suggests it was recorded later, the genealogy appears authentic, as it can be verified through an epigraph discovered in the same village. The *Vahivanca Barots* also recorded the division of lineage property among current patrons upon request. Occasionally, they documented sales of land and house property, as well as significant events in the lives of the patron families. For instance, some books contain records of men who participated in the 1857 mutiny.

Genealogical traditions in India also play a significant role in the caste system, where lineage determines social status, occupation, and marriage prospects. Each caste and sub-caste (jāti) has its own set of genealogical records, and maintaining these records has been essential for preserving the purity of caste lines. For example, the Kayasthas, a caste traditionally associated with record-keeping, have maintained extensive genealogical data over centuries, which has been used to affirm their social standing. Among the Brahmins, genealogical records known as *Kulavrutantās* meticulously trace ancestry to ancient sages, which not only reinforces their high status in the social hierarchy but also dictates their role as priests and scholars. In the case of the Rajputs, detailed genealogies called *Vanshavalis* are maintained to establish noble lineage, which directly influences their standing as warrior clans and their eligibility for alliances with other noble families. Similarly, in communities like the Marathas, genealogical traditions help in affirming their status as a warrior caste, often influencing their occupation as soldiers and landowners. These genealogical records are often consulted during marriage arrangements to ensure that unions uphold caste purity, with strict adherence to rules of endogamy within the caste and exogamy outside the *gotra*.

In Rajasthan, a state in India with a rich cultural heritage, oral traditions and genealogy are deeply interconnected and play a vital role in preserving and transmitting the history, identity, and social structure of its people. Rajasthan's unique social fabric, shaped by its history of kingdoms, clans, and communities, has fostered a strong tradition of oral storytelling and genealogical records. To study Rajasthan's medieval period, genealogies play a crucial role. In the region, specific communities of professional genealogists, known as Charans and Bhats, were integral to this process. The Charan specialists served as the bards and poets of Rajput society, maintaining a hereditary bond with their Rajput patron clans. These Charans would recite poems and ballads, known as *bat*, *vaat*, or *vatom*, during special occasions when called upon by their patron families. While many Charans practiced this bardic tradition as a secondary pursuit alongside their primary occupations, some dedicated themselves entirely to the art of poetry and storytelling, becoming full-time professionals. These professional Charans often competed to win the favor of influential clans or families, and some even attained the prestigious position of court poet. Another community involved in this tradition was the Bhats. These specialists were responsible for compiling *pidhiavalis*, or generational records. The term *Bhat*, derived from the Sanskrit word 'Bhatt', originally referred to those knowledgeable in prayers, eulogies, and invocations, but it eventually came to denote those with expertise in genealogies. Bhats served various castes, each known by a different name depending on the caste they served; for instance, those serving Rajputs were called *Varva*. The genealogies were meticulously recorded in large ledgers, known as *bahis*, which were considered the property of the Bhats. These records were recited on significant occasions, such as the birth of a child, a death, or a marriage, when updates to the *bahis* were required.

Despite their importance, many genealogical traditions in India are at risk due to modernization, urbanization, and the decline of traditional professions. Efforts are being made by scholars, historians, and cultural organizations to document and preserve these traditions before they are lost. Digital archives and initiatives to digitize ancient records are helping to ensure that future generations can access this invaluable heritage. Genealogical traditions in India are more than just records of lineage; they are a living embodiment of the country's cultural and spiritual heritage. These traditions continue to play a vital role in the social and religious life of many communities, serving as a bridge between the past and the present. As India moves forward, the preservation of these genealogical practices remains crucial for maintaining the rich diversity and continuity of its cultural identity. The construction of history through oral genealogies is a testament to the resilience and adaptability of human cultures. While modern historians often rely on written records, the study of oral genealogies provides valuable insights into the ways societies remember, interpret, and transmit their histories.



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