

From Sky to Earth: The Raji Origin Narrative and Its Cultural and Linguistic Significance

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Abstract

The Raji are one of the most endangered indigenous communities of Uttarakhand whose language and oral traditions are rapidly disappearing. This paper presents and analyses the Raji origin narrative recorded during the author's fieldwork in Jauljibi Bazar, Pithoragarh district, Uttarakhand. The narrative is presented in the original Raji language along with its IPA transcription and English and Hindi translations. Besides explaining the origin of the community, the narrative preserves valuable information about the Rajis' relationship with the forest, their cultural identity, and their traditional worldview. The paper examines the cultural meanings embedded in the narrative and highlights the linguistic features through which these meanings are expressed. It argues that documenting such narratives is essential not only for preserving the oral heritage of endangered communities but also for safeguarding their language and indigenous knowledge systems.

1. Introduction

Origin stories are among the oldest forms of oral tradition preserved by human societies. They explain how a community came into existence, where its ancestors originated, and how its relationship with the surrounding environment was established. Although such narratives are often associated with myths or legends, they are much more than stories of the distant past. They preserve collective memory, cultural values, traditional knowledge, and social identity, and therefore form an important part of a community's intangible cultural heritage. For many indigenous communities, whose traditions continue to be transmitted orally, origin narratives also serve as valuable linguistic records because they preserve vocabulary, discourse patterns, and culturally significant concepts that may disappear with language shift.

The Rajis, also known in the literature as *Banrajis*, *Banrawats*, *Banmanus* and *Rajbaar*, constitute one of the last surviving hunter-gatherer communities of the Central Himalayas. These names are exonyms; the community traditionally referred to itself as *bhulla*, although during recent field investigations this self-designation was found to be largely forgotten among younger generations. The Rajis first came to the notice of the British administration through Traill's report on Kumaon (1823), and since then they have attracted the attention of anthropologists and linguists because of their distinctive language and way of life. They are generally believed to be descendants of the prehistoric Kiratas, one of the earliest inhabitants of the Himalayan region. Over the centuries, however, interaction with neighbouring communities has considerably influenced both their language and culture.

Until the middle of the twentieth century, the Rajis depended largely on hunting, fishing and forest produce for their livelihood and were known to live in caves and temporary forest shelters. During my fieldwork, I visited two caves that members of the community identified as their former dwelling places. Today, the Rajis reside in eleven small and widely scattered hamlets located in the forested areas of *Pithoragarh*, *Champawat* and *Udham Singh Nagar* districts of Uttarakhand. Their population has always been difficult to estimate because of their earlier semi-nomadic way of life. Traill (1823)

recorded only twenty families, whereas the 2011 Census reported a population of approximately 732. A census survey conducted by the Society for Endangered and Lesser-Known Languages (SEL) in 2019 recorded a total population of 889.

The Raji language belongs to the Tibeto-Burman family and is now critically endangered. Language shift to Kumauni and Hindi has resulted in a rapid decline in the number of fluent speakers, and much of the community's oral tradition has already disappeared. During my documentation of the language, it became evident that the origin narrative presented in this paper is one of the very few traditional narratives that continues to be remembered by elderly speakers. It was recorded from *Basanti Devi* of *Jamtadi* village, *Pithoragarh* district, Uttarakhand, on 14 October 2017 in Jauljibi Bazar and is presented here in the original Raji language together with its IPA transcription and English and Hindi translations.

The objective of this paper is twofold. First, it documents an important example of Raji oral literature that forms part of the community's intangible cultural heritage. Second, it examines how the narrative reflects the Rajis' cultural identity, relationship with the forest, and traditional worldview. The paper also discusses selected linguistic features of the narrative, showing how kinship terminology, ecological vocabulary, deictic expressions, and discourse patterns contribute to the encoding of cultural knowledge. By documenting and analysing this origin narrative, the paper seeks to contribute both to the preservation of the Raji language and to a better understanding of the cultural history of one of India's most endangered indigenous communities.

2. The Raji Origin Narrative

The following origin narrative was narrated by *Basanti Devi*, a Raji speaker from *Jamtadi* village in Pithoragarh district, Uttarakhand, and was recorded during fieldwork on 14 October 2017. It is presented in the original Raji language together with its IPA transcription and English and Hindi translations (see Appendix 1). As one of the very few traditional narratives that continue to be remembered within the community, it provides valuable insights into the Rajis' perception of their ancestry and their relationship with the forest.

According to the narrative, a long time ago a man descended from heaven. He had two sons. The elder son preferred hunting and spent most of his time in the forest, whereas the younger son remained at home. One day, while the elder brother was hunting in the forest, dark clouds suddenly covered the sky. Although it was daytime, darkness spread everywhere. Lightning flashed, hail began to fall, and heavy rain caused the rivers and streams to overflow. Unable to continue his journey, the elder brother took shelter in a cave and remained there throughout the night. When morning came, he discovered that the landscape had changed completely. Floodwaters, rocks and fallen debris had destroyed the paths leading back to his home. He searched for the way with great effort but could not find it. As darkness approached once again, he remained in the forest. When news reached the younger brother that the elder brother had not returned, he sent a message asking him to remain where he was. According to the message, the way back could no longer be found, and it would be better for him to stay there, cultivate the land, and make his living in the forest. The younger brother also advised that his descendants should continue to live there.

The narrative concludes with a statement of collective identity: "**We were born there; we are his children.**" Through this concluding declaration, the Rajis trace their ancestry to the elder brother who remained in the forest. The forest thus becomes not merely the setting of the narrative but the ancestral homeland from which the community derives its identity. Unlike many origin stories that explain creation through divine intervention or supernatural events alone, the Raji origin story explains the

emergence of the community through separation, adaptation and continuity. The elder brother's inability to return home marks the beginning of a distinct way of life closely associated with the forest. The narrative therefore serves not only as an explanation of the community's origin but also as an expression of its historical memory and cultural identity.

3. Critical Analysis of the Raji Origin Narrative

The Raji origin narrative is more than an explanation of the community's ancestry. It reflects the Rajis' perception of their past, their close association with the forest, and the values that have shaped their traditional way of life. Although the narrative is brief, it contains several cultural themes that help explain how the community understands its origin and identity.

The central event in the narrative is the separation of the two brothers. The elder brother, who spends most of his time in the forest, is unable to return home after a devastating storm changes the landscape. Flooded rivers, rocks and the disappearance of familiar paths make his return impossible. The narrative presents this event as the turning point that eventually leads to the emergence of a separate community. Rather than portraying the elder brother as abandoned, the story suggests that he gradually establishes a new life in the forest, and his descendants become the ancestors of the present-day Rajis.

The forest occupies a central place throughout the narrative. It is not merely the physical setting in which the events take place but the environment in which the community's identity is formed. Hunting, caves, rivers, mountains and forests are described as natural elements of everyday life, reflecting the traditional subsistence pattern of the Rajis. This close association between people and their environment corresponds well with historical accounts describing the Rajis as one of the last hunter-gatherer communities of the Central Himalayas.

Natural forces also play an important role in the narrative. The storm, darkness, flood and destruction of the pathways bring about an irreversible change in the life of the elder brother. These events are not explained as punishment or divine intervention; rather, they function as the circumstances that separate the two brothers and establish the beginning of a new lineage. In this way, the narrative connects the origin of the community with changes in the natural environment. Another significant feature of the narrative is its emphasis on continuity across generations. The younger brother advises the elder brother to remain in the forest and encourages his descendants to continue living there. The concluding statement—*"We were born there; we are his children"*—links the present generation directly with the ancestral past. Through this declaration, the community affirms its common ancestry and its long-standing relationship with the forest.

Like many indigenous origin narratives, the Raji narrative cannot be interpreted simply as a historical account. Instead, it preserves the community's collective memory and explains its cultural identity through symbolic events and ancestral relationships. It offers valuable insights into how the Rajis perceive their past and how they explain their distinctive way of life. When viewed alongside historical and ethnographic evidence, the narrative contributes to a better understanding of the cultural history of this endangered community.

4. Why Recording Indigenous Origin Narratives Matters

For many indigenous communities, oral traditions constitute the principal means of preserving and transmitting knowledge from one generation to the next. Origin narratives occupy a particularly important place among these traditions because they explain the ancestry of a community, its relationship with the environment, and the values that shape its cultural identity. Recording such

narratives therefore contributes not only to folklore preservation but also to the documentation of indigenous knowledge systems.

For endangered language communities, the importance of documenting oral narratives extends beyond their cultural content. Narratives preserve vocabulary, discourse patterns, kinship terminology, ecological knowledge and culturally significant expressions that are often absent from elicited word lists or grammatical descriptions. They also provide examples of language in its natural communicative context, making them valuable resources for linguistic analysis as well as for future language revitalization efforts.

The need to document the Raji origin narrative is particularly urgent because the community has undergone rapid language shift during the last few decades. Increasing use of Kumauni and Hindi has resulted in a decline in the transmission of the Raji language to younger generations. During fieldwork, it was observed that many traditional oral narratives have already disappeared, and only a few elderly speakers continue to remember them. The origin narrative presented in this paper is therefore one of the last surviving examples of the community's traditional oral literature. Documenting such narratives also preserves cultural knowledge that cannot be fully understood through lexical or grammatical documentation alone. The narrative records the Rajis' traditional association with forests, hunting, caves and the Himalayan landscape, while simultaneously preserving their understanding of ancestry and community identity. Together, these elements provide a broader ethnographic context for interpreting the language.

Finally, the documentation of indigenous origin narratives contributes to the preservation of the world's linguistic and cultural diversity. Every endangered language represents a unique way of interpreting the world, and every traditional narrative reflects the historical experiences of the community that created it. By recording, analysing and preserving the Raji origin narrative, this paper contributes to safeguarding an important component of the community's intangible cultural heritage while also providing valuable material for future research in language documentation, anthropology and folklore.

5. Linguistic and Cultural Encoding in the Raji Origin Story

The Raji origin narrative is important not only because it preserves the community's traditional account of its ancestry but also because it provides valuable linguistic evidence. The narrative illustrates how language encodes cultural knowledge through vocabulary, kinship terminology, spatial expressions, repetition and discourse structure. Although relatively short, it reflects important aspects of the Rajis' traditional way of life and their relationship with the natural environment.

One of the most noticeable features of the narrative is the frequent use of kinship terminology. The two principal characters are identified simply as the elder brother and the younger brother. Their personal names are never mentioned. This pattern reflects the importance of kinship relationships in explaining the origin of the community. The narrative traces the ancestry of the Rajis to the elder brother, thereby establishing genealogy as the basis of community identity. The concluding statement, *"We were born there; we are his children,"* further strengthens this relationship by directly linking the present generation with the ancestral past.

The vocabulary of the narrative also reflects the traditional ecological setting of the Rajis. Lexical items referring to the forest, hunting, cave, river, clouds, rain, rocks and cultivation occur throughout the story. These are not incidental descriptions but represent the natural environment in which the Rajis traditionally lived. Historical accounts describe the Rajis as forest-dependent hunter-gatherers, and the

vocabulary used in the narrative corresponds closely with this traditional way of life. The story therefore preserves ecological knowledge together with the language in which it is expressed.

Another significant linguistic feature is the repeated use of deictic expressions, particularly those corresponding to "here" and "there." After the elder brother becomes separated from his home, the younger brother repeatedly asks him to remain there, in the forest. The repeated use of this spatial reference gradually transforms the forest from a temporary place of hunting into the permanent homeland of the community. Thus, spatial expressions contribute to the construction of the Rajis' cultural identity.

The narrative also contains several imperative constructions. The younger brother repeatedly instructs the elder brother not to return but to remain in the forest and cultivate the land. These repeated commands explain how the separation of the two brothers became permanent. In oral narratives, repetition of imperative expressions serves both as a discourse strategy and as a means of emphasizing culturally important events. Repetition is another characteristic feature of the narrative. Certain ideas, particularly those relating to remaining in the forest and continuing to live there, occur more than once. Such repetition is common in oral storytelling traditions, where important information is reinforced through repeated expressions. It also facilitates memorization and oral transmission from one generation to the next. The narrative begins with a conventional temporal expression equivalent to "A long time ago." Such opening lines are common in oral traditions across cultures and indicate that the events belong to ancestral rather than historical time. They prepare the listener for a narrative that explains the origin of the community and its traditional way of life.

The linguistic features discussed above show that the Raji origin narrative preserves considerably more than a traditional story. It records culturally significant vocabulary, patterns of reference, discourse organization and expressions that reflect the Rajis' social relationships and ecological environment. From the perspective of language documentation, such narratives provide examples of language in actual use and therefore complement grammatical descriptions and lexical documentation. They preserve linguistic forms together with the cultural knowledge that gives them meaning.

Table 1. Culturally Significant Lexical Items in the Raji Origin Narrative

Raji Lexical Item	English Gloss	Cultural/Historical Encoding
sərg	heaven	Marks the celestial origin of the ancestral figure.
mənəse	man/person	Refers to the ancestor from whom the lineage begins.
ɟɪʰəw bʰɑj	elder brother	Represents the ancestral figure from whom the Rajis trace their descent.
mənəŋ/ jəŋgəl	forest	The traditional habitat closely associated with Raji identity.
ʃɪkar	hunting	Reflects the traditional subsistence pattern of the community.
gohaje	cave	Indicates the earlier cave-dwelling life remembered in community tradition.
gāŋ	river	Represents the natural landscape that shapes the events of the narrative.
deho	clouds	Introduces the storm that changes the course of the story.

b^həlləl	hailstorm	Part of the natural events leading to the separation of the brothers.
k^het bari	cultivation/farming	Indicates the transition from hunting to a settled life
o^khɛ	there	A deictic expression repeatedly used to identify the new homeland
b^hulla (community autonym)	‘our people’(self-designation)	The traditional autonym of the community, reflecting indigenous identity, although not occurring in the narrative itself

Table- 1 shows that many lexical items in the narrative are directly associated with the Rajis' traditional environment, subsistence practices and kinship relations. Together, they illustrate how language preserves cultural knowledge alongside linguistic structure. Such observations demonstrate the value of recording oral narratives as part of endangered language documentation, since they preserve not only vocabulary but also the cultural meanings embedded in its use.

6. Conclusion

The Raji origin narrative is an important part of the community's oral heritage, preserving not only an account of its ancestry but also valuable evidence of its language, culture and traditional knowledge. The narrative reflects the Rajis' close association with the forest, their understanding of kinship, and their perception of community identity. Through its vocabulary, discourse structure, kinship terminology, ecological references and spatial expressions, it demonstrates how language functions as a repository of cultural knowledge. The analysis presented in this paper shows that indigenous origin narratives are significant sources of linguistic as well as ethnographic information. They preserve lexical items, patterns of discourse and cultural concepts that are often absent from elicited linguistic data. For critically endangered languages such as Raji, documenting oral narratives therefore complements grammatical and lexical documentation by recording language in its natural cultural context.

The Raji language is undergoing rapid language shift, and many traditional oral narratives have already disappeared from community memory. The origin narrative documented in this paper represents one of the few surviving examples of the community's oral tradition. Its preservation contributes not only to safeguarding the intangible cultural heritage of the Rajis but also to enriching our understanding of the linguistic and cultural diversity of the Central Himalayas.

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Appendix-1

Raji Origin Story

भोट समै हीं. सर्ग मा डा मनसे उतरोउ ए. नी पयावला हीं आय. माहेडा जाव निक्क को ही नइ जिठव भाय के. होत मनडया कूहाँ नि होय. डा ज्यू जंगल्ये शिकार खेल्यो ह्वाँ. देहो पिए झिक्कले. झिक्कल देहो पीइए. देहो भोट समय के हाँड मंडे. अक् ह्वाँ हूल्या लहुंद देहो पिए माने अल कूहाँ ह्वाँ. देहो झिक्कल भल्लला पिए झिक्कल दे आय पिए गांड पिए. जिठव भाय गुहाये अल कूहाँ दइ दिस. गाइ बीतिवाइ आले. रात हियले. हाँ लई पे ठेपै पौहाँ ल्यहाँ पिए नाउयाँ. देहो आ यूँग हाँ दिओ हाँ पिए. देहो झिक्कल बिए भल्लला पिए हिं सट्टानलभियाँ ढोला गोरु घेंत हाँ पिए. मेहनत खइ हाँ लइके पे यांग खइया. वापस हाँ पिए आए अल कूहाँ ठेपै होआ. हाँ पिए खेत बारी होइं का खबर घल्लो हाँ पिए. खबर भेजा द्वा हइ अल कूहाँ ना खइत बाये ना होइ तक धा जिव अल कूहाँ नाने तेर हीं. अइ अल खइया नो अल जियात बा हुंग कट्टोआ ना. अइ अल कूइ हां ने, अइ अल विमाई उखै जाने दिन बारी खेत बारी जाने कोई नि रै देतबारि गुजारा होइ नां. अइ अल कोइदा हीं आय अल कूहाँ ही अइला लै आय गल पोया वला हीं आयला पोइदा खाही आय गल पोया वला हीं.

IPA

bhot səmɛ hī. sərg ma ɖa mənəsɛ ʊtərou e. ni pəjaw la hī aj. mahe ɖa jaw nikk kohi nɔi jɪtʰəw bʰaj ke. hot mənənɟa ku hā ni hoj. ɖa jju jəŋgəlje ʃikar kʰeljo hwā. deho pie ʃʰikkələ. ʃʰikkəl deho piɛ. deho bʰot səməj ke hāt mənɟe. əku hā hulja ləhʊnd deho pie mane əl ku hā hwā. deho ʃʰikkəl, bʰəlləl pie ʃʰikkəl de ae pie gāŋ pie. jɪtʰəw bʰaj guhaje əlkʊhā dəi dis. gai bitɪwai ale. ratt hījəle. hā ləi pe tʰepɛ pəhā ləhā pie naʊjā. deho a juŋ hā dɪo hā pi e. deho ʃʰikkəl bɪe bʰəlləla pie hī sətʃan ləbʰijā ɖʰola goru gʰɛt hā pie. mehənət kʰəi hā ləike pe jəg kʰəija, wəpəs hā pie ae əl kʊ hā tʰepɛ hoə. hā pie kʰet bari hoī ka kʰəber gʰəllə hā pie. kʰəber bʰɛja dwa həi əl kʊ hā na kʰəit baje na hoɪ tək dʰa jɪw əl kʊ hā na ne ter hī. əi əl kʰəija no əl jɪjat ba hʊŋg kətʃoə na. əi əl kʊi hā ne əi əl wiməi ʊkʰɛ jane dɪn bari kʰet bari jane koi ni rɛ detəbari gujara hoɪ. əi əl kɔɪda hī aj əl kʊhā hi əɪla lɛ aj gəl poja wəla hī aj la pɔɪda kʰahi aj gəl poja wəla hī.

English Translation

A long time ago, a man descended from heaven. He had two sons. The elder brother liked to eat meat. He mostly lived in the forest. One day he was hunting in the forest. The sky was covered with clouds. It became dark during the day. Lightning started flashing. It started raining with hail. A lot of water came from the sky and the river flooded. The elder brother went into the cave. The night passed. It was morning. When the darkness ended, he saw that he could not see the way home. Due to heavy clouds, there was a flood and the rivers and streams were flooded and stones and rocks were lying on the way. He tried very hard to find the way, he could not go back, when it became dark he stayed there (in the forest). The news that he did not come back was coming. The younger brother sent a message that (you) stay there and do not come here. He is lost there (in the forest) and will not be able to find the way. He should stay there and do farming all day, he will be able to survive. He should stay there and not come here. His sons should also stay there. We were born there, we are his children.

Hindi Translation

बहुत समय हुआ. स्वर्ग से एक आदमी उतरा. उसके दो बेटे थे. बड़े भाई को मांस खाना अच्छा लगता था. वह अधिकतर जंगल में रहता था. एक दिन वह जंगल में शिकार खेल रहा था. आसमान में बादल छा गये. दिन में अन्धेरा छा गया. बिजली चमकने लगी. ओला सहित वर्षा होने लगी. आसमान से बहुत पानी आया तो नदी में बाढ़ आ गयी. बड़ा भाई गुफा में चला गया. रात बीत गयी. सुबह हुई. अंधेरा खत्म होने पर उसने देखा कि घर का रास्ता नहीं दिखाई पड़ रहा था. ज्यादा बादल से बाढ़ आ गई और नदी-नाले में बाढ़ और रास्ते में पत्थर - चट्टाने पड़ी हुई थी. उसने बहुत मेहनत की उसको रास्ता मिल जाए, वह वापस नहीं जा पाया, अंधेरा होने पर वहीं (जंगल) रहा. वह नहीं आया यही खबर आ रही थी. छोटे भाई ने खबर भेजी कि (तुम) वहीं रहो यहाँ मत आओ. वह वहाँ (जंगल में) खो गया है रास्ता ढूँढ नहीं पाएगा. वह वहीं रह कर दिन भर खेती बाड़ी करे, गुजारा हो जाएगा. वह वहाँ रह जाए और यहाँ न आए. उसके लड़के भी वहीं रहें. वहाँ पैदा हुए हम उसके बच्चे हैं.



Recording date -14 Oct 2017

Time-10.16 AM. **Place**- Jauljibi Bazar

Name of the Informant- Basanti Devi,

Jamtadi, Didihaat tehsil,

District Pithoragarh, Uttarakhand, India