

Oral Genealogy in Asia-Pacific: The Essence of Personal Identity and Tribal Connections

David Ouimette, CG, CGL
david.ouimette@familysearch.org

Oral genealogies celebrate ancestral connections in indigenous cultures across Asia-Pacific. Learn about the significance and richness of oral genealogies and current efforts to preserve them.

The Depth and Richness of Oral Genealogies of Indigenous Peoples

Many cultures have rich oral traditions that include extensive genealogies.

- “The most important thing for children to understand is their family connections. The knowledge of history is their treasure—not gold and silver, but genealogy.” (Seuli Logoitino Seuli, paramount chief of Falelima, Savai’i, Samoa)
- Many Samoan *matai* can recite their ancestral lines thirty or more generations, from a revered progenitor down to the present.
- The Māori people trace their descent from ancestors who departed Hawaiki in canoes bound for Aotearoa over seven hundred years ago.
- The Akha people of Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, and Yunnan Province of China trace their patrilineages from Sumio, their first ancestor, to the latest deceased male ancestor, some fifty generations.
- The Tu’i Tonga royal lineage began about 900AD with the divine father ‘Aho’eitu.

The Scope and Substance of Oral Genealogy

Oral genealogies of indigenous people encompass so much more than ancestral names.

- In Oceania, everything has a genealogy.
- Oral genealogy exists within the context of the broader oral tradition.
- Kinship systems—including those with genealogies of patrilineal, matrilineal, and bi-lineal descent—differ from culture to culture.
- The genealogy of the land connects to genealogy of the people.

- The Hawaiian concept of *mo'okū'auhau* (genealogy) has a broader meaning than merely a list of ancestral names, as one's *mo'okū'auhau* is a holistic expression of one's existence and connectedness to generations of family and tradition.
- Deeper genealogies may begin with origin stories that relate the earliest human ancestors to gods or demi-gods, as documented in several cultures (e.g., the Iban tribe in Borneo and the Akha tribe of Southeast Asia).

The Purposes and Applications of Oral Genealogy

Oral genealogies have several practical purposes in daily life:

- Self-identity, world view, and tribal affiliation
- Stewardship of land
- Inheritance of real and personal property
- Societal control and stability
- Regulation of marriage
- Representation in politics and governance
- Observance of ritual and spiritual matters
- Support in conflict resolution

The Process of Gathering, Preserving, and Publishing Oral Genealogies

Substantial groundwork must be laid before oral genealogy interviews can commence. In some countries, permission must be obtained beforehand from government agencies. In most cultures, tribal leaders direct interviewers to the people to interview. Ideally, each interview occurs in a traditional setting with minimal intervention by the interviewer. By capturing the totality and essence of an oral genealogy, future generations benefit from the preservation and publication of the permanent oral record.

Interviews may take place over multiple sessions and follow these or similar steps:

1. Gain written, informed consent of the interviewee to digitally preserve and publish audio recordings, video records, photographs, transcripts, translations, and family trees obtained from the interview.
2. Conduct the interview in the most traditional setting and manner possible.
3. Digitally preserve the recitation of a genealogy through all known generations, including names, relationships, events, and stories that are shared.
4. If the interviewer strays too far afield or is unclear, gently guide the interview back on course or seek the necessary clarity.
5. Following the interview, transcribe the audio or video recording.

6. Meet again with the interviewee to review the transcript, correct any errors, and add any details left out of the original interview.
7. Translate the transcript into national or diasporic languages as needed.
8. Produce family trees from the transcripts.
9. Preserve, share, and publish copies of digital artifacts and family trees, honoring conditions or restrictions required by the government or tribe.

The Need to Preserve Oral Genealogy

- There is a phrase in Hawaiian, “*I malama ia ka ike, hua mai ka ike*,” which means, “when knowledge is protected, knowledge emerges.”
- Modern challenges transmitting oral genealogy to the rising generation
- History of transcription work by colonizers as well as within tribes and clans
- Advances in digital preservation and publication of oral genealogies

The Future of Oral Genealogy in Asia-Pacific

- Progress of current projects and expected expansion in years to come
- Online experiences with oral genealogy, customized by culture
- Relevance for indigenous people in country and in the diaspora
- Its continuing potency for connecting families

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