

Memory and Enshrining Writing: Rethinking the ethnocentrism imbedded in written vs. oral traditions

Elizabeth Eklund
University of Arizona

Author's note: The following essay is a call for further research, rather than a summary of all the available research on the topic. There is a need for both anthropologists and archaeologists alike to start teasing apart the tradition of storytelling from other forms of social memory that carry forward key lessons of (sacred) history.

Introduction

This essay seeks to shed light on the debate about the validity of oral history, not by focusing on oral traditions but rather by addressing cultural biases within mainstream US culture that undermine non-written histories. First, I will illustrate a few of the differences between folklore and sacred / historical accounts to show that there is a problematic expectation of entertainment and make-believe that has been associated with orally transmitted folklore. Then, I will discuss the vocabulary used to describe unwritten accounts versus written ones, to show how dominant (Euro-American) cultures have a strong ethnocentric bias that honors the written text over the oral form. I will also comment on some of the hegemonic discourses and practices that defend and reproduce this bias against oral traditions. Finally, I will show that, despite a firm belief that something that has been written down has permanence, Euro-American heritage (dominant US culture) writers are part of a tradition that *intentionally* changes stories in new and different written and recorded forms. This *documented* variation in narratives (histories or just stories), subtly reinforces the hegemonic discourse that a people cannot accurately maintain a sacred history in the absence of writing.

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Oral Traditions are not Folklore

Ideally, and more than once, I have stood in a dark cabin in the woods, but more often I have stood before an undergraduate class, and recounted the legend of the White Wolf. The story I tell is adapted from Schwartz' *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark*. I use the word adapted because "memorized," while equally true, does not capture the fact that I know I am not telling it using the exact same words Schwartz wrote. Rather, I know that what matters are the key details, the elements of the story, and the audience's reaction as I drag them into the tale of a former hunter that broke a vow to never hunt again.

This is part of the art of storytelling as I have learned to practice it. Folklore exists to be shared and spread. However, there is a major difference between the realm of make-believe (popular stories) and fact (stories we tell about our past and our world). A story, like the beguiling stories I share before a campfire, exist to entertain. All I need to know are the key plot points. In contrast, certain venues demand precision. An individual can go to prison if they "fill in the details" if called before a court to testify under oath. Setting aside all the epistemological debates about "what is a fact," generally there is consensus that "what happened" at a crime scene should not change. Facts don't have to be "remembered" from recent events. Most of the readers of this article will know "what happened" on Sept. 11, 2001. While few may remember first hand Dec. 7, 1941, shared facts of "what happened" on that date are part of US history. It is true, some readers will know more about Sept. 11 and Dec. 7 than others, and there are a lot conspiracy theories out there. But these histories are narratives based on indisputable facts. Sacred stories, "true" stories, and "facts" are not meant to be changed.

Sacred stories occupy an odd place in writing-centric cultures. Despite primacy placed on a Holy Book, it is common in Abrahamic belief systems to memorize all or part of the sacred text. This act of remembering does not allow for change. Rather, the memorization of short Bible verses or the recita-

tion of the Quran in its entirety, is expected to be accurate. This contrasts with the European fairytale where many of the classic stories have vestigial passages and parts have been lost to time (Opie and Opie 1974). The folklore tradition of “urban legends” are particularly known for their variations.

However, facts, accounts of the past, and sacred stories are not just a part of communities that practice writing. Because US (and European) traditions of folklore have been practiced orally as a mean of storytelling, sacred and historic narratives maintained as part of an oral tradition have been widely mistaken as just “folklore.” It should also be noted that concepts of power and class are imbedded into the word folklore. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (2017), folklore is “traditional beliefs, legends, and customs, current among the common people” or “popular fantasy or belief.” This denotation indicates the beliefs are “common” or belonging to lower class “ordinary” people. The connotation, specifically the use of the word “fantasy,” captures the notion that these are false beliefs or not factually based. In practice, folklore can also have a positive connotation. Jim Griffith and the Southwest Folklife Alliance founded continue to host Tucson Meet Yourself. Tucson Meet Yourself (2017) defines folklore and folklife as the “informal, familiar, common side of the human experience that is not contained in the formal records of culture.” This organization actively breaks down the marginalization of everyday (“folk”) life by celebrating the its importance and diversity. Nevertheless, “folklore” remains “informal” by definition.

Choosing the word, “oral history” has helped restore dignity to non-written traditions. Many sacred traditions are not meant to change the same way sacred stories and written histories (facts) are also not meant to change. Furthermore, the term “oral history” is also used to define an anthropological method of gathering personal narratives about the past as retold by individuals present during past events. For this reason, scholars like Keith Basso (1996) simply use the word “history” while commenting on how previous scholars (including Spicer) had a difficult time recognizing the practices

of Western Apache historians because of the ethnocentric assumption that history is written, or “in print.”¹

Enshrining Writing

Conventional science places a strong degree of certainty or permanence in inscribed forms over oral traditions. Indeed, there are many strengths to the written word. To write is to set one idea in a form that can be stored, distributed, and shared. The importance of creating written words is captured in the methodology of ethnographic data collection. There is a moment, which is temporary, ephemeral. The ethnographer must not only bear witness, they inscribe it in their field notes (after Geertz 1973). To describe the act of writing as “inscribing” is a term often used, and sometimes critiqued (for a small set of recent examples see Ghaffar-Kucher 2015; Knowlton 2015; and Young 2015). The permanency of “inscribe” captures the sense of something durable, yet the etymology captures a direct link to writing.² While “write” and “inscribe” have drifted apart in modern English, there is a strong link between writing and creating a durable, permanent and unchanging form.

The importance of writing is enshrined in the very concept of “civilization.” As Spicer (1962) illustrates in *Cycles of Conquest*, the project of bringing “civilization” varied based on the ethnocentric view of the colonizers. A key component was schooling and the teaching of writing. The high place of writing as part of cultural evolution models is also shown in the work of Morgan (1877) and Tyler (1920). This deeply problematic concept marginalizes oral tradition societies, making it harder to be “civilized” without writing.

Regardless of the strengths of documentation, these definitions are deeply hegemonic. They offer no place for memorization nor a sense of how people can maintain knowledge of their

1 Basso’s work demonstrates that Anglo-American history is “unspoken and unanimated, it lies silent and inert on the printed English page” while Apache historical materials are in “footprints” and “paths” on the land, shown through place names (1996: 33).

2 Specifically, the word comes from “Latin *inscribere* to write in or upon, < in- (in- prefix2) + *scribere* to write.” (Oxford English Dictionary 2017)

past. Like the ideas of folklore, the idea of writing vs. oral tradition reflects a form of Gramscian hegemony where common peoples' beliefs and history are perceived as fluid because that moment of action is transient and cannot be fully documented if it is not inscribed in one form or another. This does not mean that writing *isn't* permanent. As seen by the stela of the Maya and of ancient Egypt, records can outlast memory. It is the subtle belief that inscribing is more permanent or accurate than memory that produces a hegemonic discourse that keeps the oral histories chaotic (in a Gramscian sense, keeping the proletariat disorganized and easier to control) and less socially valued when dominant society crafts historical narratives.

Mocking Memory

The other side of valuing writing is the mirroring hegemonic discourse that discounts human capacity to accurately remember details. Again, the fallacies of human memory and quantifiable research into what advances or hinders the production and details of memory and recall have been well documented and carefully and repeatedly studied (for a small fraction of recent examples, Garcia-Osta and Alberini 2009, Lindner et al. 2017, Melinder et al. 2017, Patihis and Place 2017, Peltonen et al. 2017, Soleti et al. 2017, Titta et al. 2013, Zovkic et al. 2013).

The validity or uncertainty of memory is beyond the scope of this essay. It is a hegemonic view that people do not, or cannot accurately memorize or orally transmit accounts across multiple narrators, a lynchpin of oral traditions. This is seen in the quest for first-hand accounts, the preference for eyewitnesses, and how things that happened to "a friend of a friend" quickly fall into urban legends.

Whatever the truth of memory and the weaknesses of oral traditions are, mainstream US culture teaches a bias against orality to our children in the game "telephone." In this game, a group of children sit in a circle. One student starts the game by passing a message, whispering a short statement in their neighbor's ear. That student tells the next, and so on un-

til the last to receive the message says it out loud. Usually, the message is seriously distorted and has changed greatly from the original, and the kids laugh. The moral of the game is how badly garbled a message can become when it is passed on orally. However, I have found that when the game is played with older children, they intentionally change the message because they know it is supposed to become hilariously distorted. The accuracy of the game becomes muted because it is a children's game, rather than adults attempting to be as accurate as possible. The purpose of the game is to teach children that oral transmission of stories is riddled with errors. Whether the core lesson is true or not, the game intentionally reinforces a hegemonic discourse against oral traditions.

Documenting is not Enough: The Tradition of Intentionally Alternating Stories

Quests for the “authentic” original or earliest version of a folktale have promoted a popular myth that people do not remember or tell oral stories the exact same way each time. We can only guess at the earliest version (shown by the work of Opie and Opie 1974 and by Tatar 2017). European fairytales and American folklore have origins in imaginary (empty) time (to draw from Benedict Anderson, 2006). It is difficult, even impossible to say if there is an “authentic” version of a story.

For example, consider the contrasts between “*Sole, Luna, e Talia* [Sun, Moon, and Talia]” (Basile 1634), “*La Belle au bois dormant* [Sleeping Beauty in the Wood]” (Perrault 1697), “*Dornröschen* [Little Briar Rose]” (Grimm and Grimm 1812), and “Sleeping Beauty” (Disney 1959). These similar but different versions of the story “show” how the tale shifted over time.³ It is possible that this reflects drift in oral retellings, but why the change? It may be possible that people could not accurately retell the story they had heard. However, narrators

³ It should also be noted that a different argument, that there are recurrent motifs in folklore regardless of time and culture. This is demonstrated by the Arne-Thompson classification index. Using that system, these “sleeping beauty” stories are classified as AT Type 410.

may have intentionally modified the story either to suit their needs or to reflect anticipated interests of their audience.

This *intentional* shift is *documented* in the so-called Disneyfication of fairy tales. It is, again, beyond the scope of this paper, but it has been widely discussed how Disney (Walt Disney Company) has changed “classic” fairy tales for a variety of reasons (for examples, see Bell et al. 1995, Dong 2011, Mortensen 2008). However, Disneyfication of fairy tales has also spawned a series of intentional alterations, including productions like DreamWork’s *Shrek* film series. Why might the movies diverge from *documented* narratives of classic tales? We are not surprised by explanations like “artistic liberty” or attempts to commercialize, or even political correctness. Today, fairy tales are considered children’s literature. This allegation is often attributed to Disney (in popular discourse), but remember that the Brother’s Grimm named their 1812 collection *Kinder-und Hausmärchen* [Children’s and Household Tales]. Yet, over a century ago L. Frank Baum originally wrote the Oz books (1900-1920) in part because fairy tales were considered too violent.

Sometimes a story attracts intentional revision to make it either happier or more violent. For example, William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* has been re-imagined multiple times. In many of these versions, some on Broadway (*West Side Story*), children’s movies (*Gnomeo and Juliet*), others in TV scripts (various shows) allow the starcrossed lovers to live, or find a different path to a happy ending. Baz Luhrman’s 1996 production of *Romeo + Juliet* maintained the original dialog and added more violence with the addition of firearms.

While the stories recorded by Mother Goose (Charles Perrault) and the Brothers Grimm are from the oral tradition, part of the western tradition has been to change stories, even when there is a clear print version that has no tie to oral traditions. How many variations of *Harry Potter* style stories have been written as young adult fiction? How many *Star Wars* stories seek to cash in on the success of the franchise? How many “origin” stories exist for *Spider-man*? How many times has Hollywood “rebooted” a successful movie?

There is a clear and repeated drive to retell and revise popular and public domain stories in mainstream US culture. While this could be attributed to current capitalistic models, a cursory review of European history shows an interest in the re-telling of popular stories. Classic paintings re-tell myths and historical events. Classic theater retold the stories as well. For example, consider the mythology of Agamemnon, whose history was inscribed by the poet Homer and playwrights Aeschylus and Sophocles. We know the details of these accounts because the texts have survived to the present day. However, despite being a people with a writing history, ancient Greeks still re-wrote and retold stories.

Collectively, this could be taken as evidence that it is human nature to modify and retell stories. It would be a reasonable interpretation if it were not for the fact that the same descendant culture, Abrahamic faiths, have strived to find the earliest and most accurate version of sacred texts.^{4,5} In other words, western culture feels free to retell certain accounts to suit contemporary needs and tastes, while seeking to preserve the “authenticity” of other records.

Remembering the Flaws While Recognizing the Bias

Working in Italy and Kentucky (US), Alessandro Portelli (1991) has gathered oral histories that were factual and in some cases counter-factual. His work showed that people could remember things differently. However, instead of focusing on how some accounts were factually accurate, and others “false,” he wove the narratives together to demonstrate subjectivity, how

4 This process of finding the most “accurate and early version” of sacred texts is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls led to revisions of some Biblical texts, specifically Isaiah and Habakkuk to capture a more accurate translation. Bible scholars will point out to the history of identifying heresies and apocryphal texts and the challenge of identifying the “authenticity” of ancient documents. The preferred term in the New Revised Standard Version (Catholic Bible, used in some Protestant denominations) is “ancient authorities.” (Metzger 2016).

5 It should also be noted that the Quran was both memorized and recorded on papyrus in Arabic when it was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad AD 610-632.

people remembered what was important to them and created meaning for an event.

There is still much to be learned about oral history and how oral traditions are maintained in the absence of written records. Any research should not approach oral records with bright eyed naïveté. However, we (Euro-Americans and those who learn from that tradition), must be more aware that our culture celebrates writing and is deeply hostile to the multiplicity of other ways of knowing and passing on wisdom. While memory may be imperfect, we must recognize that we have inherited a tradition that loves modifying, personalizing, and retelling narratives. This is demonstrated through practices as diverse as the way Hollywood has retold fairy tales, and in revisionist histories where scholars uncover new facts (or “facts”) to create a different narrative that can fundamentally alter how an event is perceived. This desire to change may even be viewed in the emergence of “alternative facts” in the current political climate. It is these biases that we, as scholars must face before we draw upon oral histories. Though they may, indeed be imperfect, we have emerged from a hegemonic discourse that has trained us to expect them to be inaccurate before we have even begun the conversation.

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