

ORALITY AND ORAL TRADITIONS AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE FOR ARCHAEOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

Oral traditions or dialogic tradition is transmission of knowledge, ideas, art, customs, from one generation to another in effort to preserve the past through vocal utterance for millennia prior to the invention of writing. Religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Catholicism have used oral traditions along with writing system to transmit their hymn, poems, rituals, mythologies, folk stories to future generations. Until about 4000 BCE, all literature was transmitted orally then writings developed in Egypt and the Mesopotamian civilizations. Just like the sites we cover, the objects we obtain, the bones we discover, the monuments we see, oral traditions too has a potent contribution in the archaeological study of past. This is really important to understand the importance of the long oral traditions. Even contemporary or modern scientifically prosperous archaeologists accept the need of dialogic tradition for the reconstruction of past. "Proximity is not alien to us in India. We are able to talk at some length. Krishna Menon's record of the longest speech ever delivered at the United Nations (nine hours non-stop), established half a century ago (when Menon was leading the Indian delegation), has not been equalled by anyone from anywhere" (The Argumentative Indian pg.21). Thus, it is hard to avoid the significance of dialogue in the historical studies of our country. To understand the past of India it is important to recognise the importance of Indian Argumentative heritage and investigate the interactions and evolving traditions. Scientific experts may argue that their analyses are different from oral traditions by criteria of scientific research and authenticity whereas oral historiography clearly has its own criteria of applauding and evaluating the events of the past. "In Hopi clan histories, there is no disagreement that the Snake clan came from the archaeologically known site of Tokoonavi (near Navajo Mountain) On the historical side of Hopi narrative, directly historical features include the named village sites themselves. Surely, as Fewkes suggests, many of these are directly identifiable and verifiable with Hopi clan histories: We thus have the names of three pueblos occupied by the Patki [Water clan] during their migration from Palatkwabi, before they arrived at Chaves pass, which have not yet been identified. These are Kwiniapa, Utcevaca, and Kuiichalpi. The determination of the sites of these villages, and a study of their archaeology, would prove to be an important contribution to the knowledge of the origin of the Patki clans. Anawita, chief of the Patki, a very reliable man, can point them out to any archaeologist who has the means to prosecute these studies in Arizona (Fewkes 1900), or the Water clan from Homol'ovi (near Winslow, Arizona)" (Whiteley pg.407). Also, Australian aboriginal culture has thrived on oral traditions especially of the Gunditjmarra people of south-western Victoria who have been transmitting oral histories for about 60,000 years to reflect their strong bond with the landscape. They used to navigate their territories by through short songs popularly known as songlines.

KEYWORDS: *Orality and Oral Traditions, Archaeology*

INTRODUCTION

“All narratives of the past are coded” (Levi Strauss 1966). The reconstruction has a principle structure and its own basis to evaluate the happenings and check the authenticity of the mentioning of any particular accounts of the past. As said by Whiteley, “A rapprochement between the disciplines of anthropology and history provides some models for transcending the great divide of "myth" and "history". On the way to get a deeper analysis to historical understanding we must draw a division between the historical societal ‘myths’ and actual ‘history’ and distinguish the fiction from reality. “The bible, for example, is a classic case of a mythological text, with historical elements embedded in it”. The Vedic texts too, were originally orally transmitted and composed through hymns from teachers to disciples. Anthropologists, folklorists and other ethnographers dig deep into the insights or oral traditions from the ancient, medieval worlds that have survived only as transmissions of once living performances and give it a style of historical reconstruction.

In the 1930s, Milman Parry and Albert Lord conducted extensive research and fieldwork on oral traditions in what comprised then as Yugoslavia. They recorded almost 15,000 orally performed poems in an effort to understand that how in the past the stories with thousands and more of lines were memorized, recalled and passed on by people who had no knowledge of reading or writing. It turned out to be that it would have and mostly done by the oral poets by incorporating a particular pattern or phrases of storytelling, riddles, proverbs, dramas, vidushak that enabled their mnemonic and oral teachings. Though, any evolution and innovation in oral traditions cannot be spoken of explicitly. With this knowledge, Parry and Lord were able to determine and understand the long and epic poetry of the ancient Greek Iliad and Odyssey which is an oral composition. Another familiar work with deep roots in oral traditions include the Mesopotamian fragmentary records of Gilgamesh, depicts a broadly distributed ancient tales in the middle east that was passed forward from generations to generations and culture to culture in different languages or dialects before being finally inscribed. Likewise, the medieval English Beowulf had an oral tradition before the Irish missionaries introduced the inked letter on parchment.

Another fine analysis could be achieved by the Irish fairy rings. The way that Irish fairy rings are remembered and memorialised is a fascinating example of the tensions between scientific epistemologies and those that might be regarded as folkloric. Ringforts, a common archaeological feature in the Irish landscape, are described in the archaeological literature as locales of early medieval habitation while they are also popularly thought of as portals into the supernatural "fairy Otherworld." Understanding the ways that these sites are perceived is a crucially important aspect of appreciating how people engage with, utilise and ultimately conserve and/or preserve them. Hence, there is a connection between the scientific archaeology and oral traditions when it comes to preserve certain landscapes. A similar connection is evident in reconciling, different ways of 'knowing' about an archaeological or cultural site, known as the village of Poromoi Tamu, in Papua New Guinea. In what might be thought of as irreconcilable ontologies, the western, scientific and the local ways of understanding the site, its sedimentary matrix and the depositional processes that created it, are presented not in competition with each other but rather as simply different ways of explaining the same phenomena. It is indeed true that story telling is integral to memory production, but equally to understanding one's place in the world. It has been argued that archaeologists come to understand history in places by way of "pre-understanding" (the subliminal cultural, prejudicial notions that embed their actions and understandings), and that by framing and reframing the context "what they see is eventually what they make of what they see" Thus, memory like any other knowledge, is constructed from the language and concepts available to the person remembering. The challenge is to understand the cultural ingredients that go into

accounts of a remembered and interpreted past." Therefore, there is no doubt that while constructing a mainstream history by the help and significance of oral and folkloric traditions one should bear in mind the line of borders between 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity'.

There are various juxtapositions regarding the authenticity and reconstruction of dialogic traditions and their significance in archaeology. Scholars like Hobsbawm has argued that, for the "invention of tradition" literature social memory is regarded as central to ethnic or national identity. Actively constructed by political and cultural elite, it is seen as something that is inculcated within the social group through monuments, memorials, museums, galleries, and the public rituals of the state. All of these things, it is argued, represent attempts to fix history, and provide a sense of stability and permanence, particularly with respect to identity. Some scholars see the oral traditions or 'social memory' as authentic and a form of counter history that challenges the elitist grand narratives of national and universalizing histories. Here an opposition between memory and history can be seen where the former is positively associated with the "personal" and the "subjective" and the latter with the "public" and the "objective." As Radstone and Hodgkin (2003, p. 10) point out, the focus in this area of research has been on memory's capacity to subvert the authority of grand narratives, and the concept has been used by scholars to "retrieve that which runs against, disrupts or disturbs dominant ways of understanding the past." Klein (2000, p. 145) even suggests that memory has taken on a quasi-religious role in an age of historiographical crisis where it figures as a therapeutic alternative to historical discourse (Lynette Russell). As per Lambek and Smith, memory is not something we have or possess. Processes of remembering and forgetting are associated with particular practices and particular inter-subjective relationships. Through these practices and relationships people engage in cultural processes of memory work through which the past is continually interpreted and negotiated in a dialectical relationship with the present. Memory then is a transient product of the activities of remembering and reminiscing, which take place in the context of social interaction, and interactions between people and their environments. Another related thread in recent research focuses on the cultural forms that mediate personal and social forms of oral memory (Feuchtwang 2003). Many have focused on how social memory is "text-mediated," but a far more diverse range of "memory props" mediates social memory including images, objects, oral histories, stories, folklore, myths, events, and places (Wertsch 2002). Of course the extent to which social memory is mediated by these mnemonic devices depends to some extent on how far removed people are from direct experience of the events, people and places concerned. Though, the chronological distance is by no means a simple matter of arithmetic with memories being subject to a kind of time induced decay. Social memory may be based on first hand testimony, or the experiences of others with whom there is a sense of intimacy, whether based on direct trans-generational family ties, broader ties of kinship and community affiliation, or even an extensive imagined community, such as a nation (Russell pg3). The matter ranges from first-hand oral history based on personal experiences within people's lifetimes (e.g., Casella, Cooper and Yarrow), to forms of post memory transcending several generations (Jones, Russell, Wesson), to oral tradition and folklore that subverts the linear chronological schemes of archaeologists and historians and embodies a sense of time immemorial (David, et al, NiCheallaigh, Norder). The relationship between orality and writing in the context of social memory is of course particularly important in respect to historical archaeology, a field that has long been preoccupied with the relationship between material culture and texts. Overall, it is now widely recognised that social memory is a form of relational practice, which is located, disparate, and often dissonant in nature. Social memories are composed of the fragmented stories that surround specific places and events; that are passed around within and between generations.

They are not homogeneous, nor are they uncontested. As Taithe (1999, p. 125) points out social memory is "a multi layered terrain of sedimentary deposits of historical artefacts, witness accounts, oral histories, and forgotten and invented landscapes." It is a realm of controversy, where people actively engage with the past in the present, mobilising memory to interpret present events and relationships and to inform the production of identity and place. As such it has a powerful hold on people's conception of themselves and their place in the world. During the early history of archaeology there was a keen interest amongst antiquarians and archaeologists in oral memory, ranging from European folklore to Indigenous oral traditions in the new world (Gazin-Schwartz and Holtorf 1999; Trigger 1989). Oral traditions were routinely collected and used to attribute chronology, function and/or cultural affiliation. Indeed, initially the prominence of oral tradition was more extensive in prehistoric or pre-contact archaeology than it was for recent historic periods where textual sources took precedence (see Purser 1992). Yet as a result, oral traditions became appropriated into the developing scientific epistemology of the nascent discipline, which sought to produce totalizing narratives, frequently framed by the idea of a national community. Evidently, oral perceptions had a significant if generally unacknowledged role in determining supposedly scientific archaeological perceptions of these monuments. However, ultimately, despite forms of resistance by tradition bearers, 'the rationalist narratives of science, which were being progressively touted as the quintessential markers of modernity' triumphed over folk narratives (Ni Cheallegh).

Further, more obvious features of the directly historical include sequences of migrations, acts of social production and reproduction (like crop systems and irrigation ditches from the Little Colorado River), elements of historic social forms (warfare, even specific battles, the One-Horn society), relations with other tribes (Pimas, Maricopas), and so on. Even such elements as the presence of sand-flies causing what, malaria, or other epidemic disease?- might potentially yield fruit for an archaeological explanation of the site. The identification of this event with the name of a Second Mesa village, Supawlavi ("place of the mosquitoes"), and the association of some Homol'ovi clans with that village, provides another example of social memory encoded within a Hopi archival genre (i.e., place-names). All these aspects thus speak either directly or indirectly to potentially "testable" historical and cultural realities: they occur against the background of a structured set of practices and ideas that can be enlisted to aid in archaeological explanation. In short, such narratives evidence both mythological and historical consciousness (Fewkes 1900).

Archaeologists cannot be expected to accept accounts of travel on cranes' backs literally. Similarly, oral historians cannot be expected to provide accounts that conform exactly to scientific models of falsifiability. But that does not mean the latter are thus by definition unrigorous, or are not held accountable to social standards of truth evaluation. In scientific experiments themselves, multiplicity and reproducibility add major sources of corroboration to a proposed explanation. If, as Bahr (Bahr et al. 1994) has shown for some Pima narratives, oral accounts recorded at different junctures (over a two-hundred-year period) match in form and content, this may help strengthen their cumulative narrative authority. The specific Water clan narrative (recorded in the 1880s) discussed above is just one version of many recorded subsequently that conform to the same pattern of both structure and content (and I have experienced the same with several other clans). On the other hand, accounts only subscribed to by single individuals (lacking recognized authority as experts in their communities, and who may change their telling substantially from one occasion to the next) should properly be rejected as failing to conform with indigenous canons of the truly

historical. "Indigenous canons" include the social checks and balances on much individual variation in tight-knit, conservative, traditional communities. Where narratives occur in ritual contexts, often those contexts themselves prescribe honesty and truthfulness as a religious imperative. Violations of truth- this is the case at Hopi, and among the other Pueblos, for example-imperil the individual narrator with the possibility of supernatural sanctions (illness or death, for him/herself or a family member). Such social characteristics in themselves constrain the free invention of traditions: indeed, the very fact that clan histories partly legitimate contemporary interests requires that they be consistent and be judged so by others. Individuals who retell these must adhere to those canons or risk dismissal as cranks (Geertz, 1983) on the interpretations of clan narratives in *Book of the Hopi* (Walters 1963). Consistency is not a sufficient condition of historical accuracy by itself, of course: there are many consistently told fantasies. But insofar as it speaks to a structured sense of the past simultaneously anchored by other social and epistemological criteria of verisimilitude, consistency is a necessary criterion of an account's historicity. Additionally, archaeologists may well profit from examining analyses of oral history that have sought to establish criteria of validity and repeatability. In Native American oral traditions and history, these questions have often been "tested" in the Indian Claims Commission and other aboriginal land- claims cases since the 1950s. Such claims require testimony resting principally on oral traditions of land use and past social practices (e.g., the Garland Press Ethnohistory series).

In its approach to history, scientific archaeology contrasts sharply with that other university discipline, classical archaeology-hardly a field lacking analytical rigor. If it is seriously concerned to deepen explanation, prehistoric archaeology of native North America (for one) might well learn from the approaches of its classical sibling. In such a light, the very possibility of examining a ruin without consulting the archived histories in oral traditions and other cultural modes of encoding the past would be inconceivable. It would be like excavating prehistoric Roman ruins without consulting any Latin sources. And oral traditions, if treated seriously, may yield whole new areas of inquiry. For example, Hopis say part of the area north of Black Mesa known as Kawestima was inhabited by Keresan speakers (who are currently concentrated on the Rio Grande, and at Acoma and Laguna), and that the Antelope Mesa town of Kawayka'a too was Keresan speaking (Yava 1978). Apart from a brief early attempt by Elsie Clews Parsons, no anthropologist took this claim seriously for a long time (very recently, some archaeologists have begun to do so (Linda Cordell, T. J. Ferguson, 2002). And yet, Kawayka'a is a Keresan term for Laguna Pueblo; etymologically, its origin is not Hopi (Malotki 1990). Kawestima is very probably a Keresan place-name originally: it is identical with the Keresan term for the sacred mountain of the north (Whiteley 1988). Likewise, the Hopi site Weenima, to the east of the Hopi Mesas, is identical with the (Rio Grande) Keresan term for a western sacred mountain. And one account of Hopi Snake society songs (again originally from north of the Hopi Mesas) is that they are in Keres. So, here, information from several branches of oral history/tradition, supported by known ethnographic facts, could be the impetus for a different kind of culturally focused archaeological research in the Southwest-tracking this Keresan identification and migration, from Hopi, Keresan, and archaeological perspectives-akin to the modes of investigation in classical archaeology. Clearly, taking such a new direction in inquiry requires proactive cooperation between archaeologists and indigenous peoples. Given the distrust native people typically have for anthropologists and archaeologists, it is incumbent upon university departments to reach out to include indigenous histories: to cultural or historic preservation departments of the tribes, or other identified local historians. It will not be easy, socially or epistemologically: but in the process, entirely new, and explanatorily rich lines of archaeological research may emerge.

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