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## TIME, ORAL TRADITION, AND TECHNOLOGY

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*Andrew Martindale, Sara Shneiderman, and Mark Turin*

**H**OW DO WE REMEMBER the phone numbers of friends, the birthdays of family members or, most basically, the things we're supposed to do tomorrow? Have billions of global citizens subcontracted remembering to digital devices in this technology-driven, postindustrial age? An examination of different methods of memory offers insights into how individual and collective memory works. Through a comparative lens, we see that memory is not simply passive recollection but rather a participatory form of identity construction that is highly cultural and varied. Memory emerges from the practices of individuals as well as from collectively agreed-upon recollection. Memory making occurs in an instant but records history over thousands of years.

Many human societies have relied on increasingly sophisticated recording techniques – ochre and rock, paper and pen, keyboard and screen – to document the world around them and assist them

in the mission of recall. But other communities have rich oral traditions of remembering that have persisted largely unchanged over millennia. Communities that rely on oral records understand that the relationship between experience and understanding across individuals and groups defines how we know the world in particular ways. Although digital media has only been widespread for a few decades, it has considerable parallels to these systems of oral record keeping, which may explain why social media has spread so rapidly and become such an important form of knowledge making. We can see, and perhaps learn from, the ancient principles of orality as we navigate the modern world.

Within communities of shared culture, memory is constructed selectively through foundational stories; what we remember about our ancestors and ourselves is a curated subset of all possible memories. We forget the ones that do not align with our expectations. Take, for example, the collective, century-long amnesia of non-Indigenous Canadians regarding the Indian residential school system. All of us know the world through our culture, through a mosaic of experiences that functions as an ideological window into reality, resulting in a series of culturally distant bubbles, something we are witnessing in modern political debates. Although the human propensity for creating memory is shaped by technology, it is not determined by it. Record keeping, whether by rote or device, is simply the medium by which we share and recollect the historical events that enliven the stories we believe about ourselves. Traditional story forms thrive in the new digital world, and new digital practices create their own cultural communities in ways familiar to older patterns of oral transmission,

suggesting that humans return to core cultural forms of memory making in any technological context.

As anthropologists, we have each had the privilege of learning from Indigenous communities with rich storytelling cultures and oral traditions, engaging with them as they have engaged with the textual and, then, the digital world. From our work with the Thangmi people of Nepal and northeastern India and the Tsimshian people of the North American Northwest Coast, we have come to understand some important aspects of communal memory. Memory is not a singular enterprise; it emerges as conscious recollection from embodied knowledge or experience, a process that often, for these Indigenous societies, links orality and performance in a powerful dynamic.

For the Thangmi community, oral traditions serve as their chief technology of memory. Members of the Thangmi community, with whom we (Sara Shneiderman and Mark Turin) collaborated for many years, were surprised by our limited power of recall. How could these outsiders, who appeared otherwise quite capable, be so bad at remembering? Why did they have to write everything down? Had they forgotten how to remember? In their own and other communities, the Thangmi have a rich reservoir of nontextual techniques embedded within oral traditions and given shape through ritual practice and performance. Indeed, Thangmi worldviews are so shaped by their commitment to oral tradition that they classify other peoples around them into two groups: those with textual religious traditions and those without.

Despite a strong cultural grounding in oral traditions, or perhaps specifically because of it, the Thangmi, like many speakers of endangered languages, have embraced new digital media with

excitement. Thangmi participants in Nepal have recorded shamanic recitations of oral texts and shared them via video on social media, where they are consumed by members of the diaspora community in India, the Gulf States, and beyond. Migrant communities working in New York have recorded wedding ceremonies and songs on smartphones and then uploaded them to YouTube, where they are watched by relatives in remote Himalayan villages via cellular networks. Facilitated by digital technology, the circulation of oral tradition helps the “traditional” past converge with the practices of the present, producing transnational cultural forms of memory that rely on hybrid technological repertoires.

These insights are self-evident to communities such as the Thangmi who have circumvented the well-trodden, singular path from orality to literacy and have instead leveraged their orality directly into the digital world. Social media helps Thangmi community members rediscover and redefine their culture, bringing images, audio, and video together in ways that mirror traditional memory-making practices through storytelling. Digital communication is a new medium, but the passed-down principles of culture – the stories of who the Thangmi are – are just as meaningful because they capture how the experience of being Thangmi is produced through lived practices and performances. The agility with which members of the Thangmi community harness digital media allows for the continuity of cultural ways of knowing in the face of (indeed, with the help of) massive technological change. It also reflects a deep compatibility between traditional oral memory and the digital world of recording.

The power of memory extends beyond just the experiences of life

that can be recorded and shared through various digital platforms. Humans figured out long ago that if memory-making experiences create culturally contingent ways of knowing the world, then experience can be used to craft and even discipline our understanding of the world. Cultural communities share a tacit understanding of what things mean, an understanding that emerges from sharing lifetimes of experience and memory. How we see the world is influenced by our memories of it. Where storytelling conveys the conscious understanding of cultural knowledge, performance captures the experiences that transmit the less conscious frameworks of knowledge upon which conscious understanding is built.

To illustrate the importance of cultural context in shaping collective notions of memory, consider the history of European contact with the Tsimshian people, whose waters and lands occupy the northern coast of British Columbia, Canada. The first Europeans to make contact with the Tsimshian people came armed with almost three hundred years of experience as colonizers and had strong preconceptions about the Indigenous peoples they encountered. In the European worldview, the Tsimshian, and all Indigenous peoples of North America, fit into a grand racial taxonomy somewhere between Africans, "Asiatics," and "Wild Men"; the nuanced differences among them were less important than their distance from Europeans. For their part, Tsimshian had contrasting views on the provenance of their uninvited colonizers, as is recorded in their oral records (*adawx*). The notion that Europeans, with their deathly pallor, were deceased ancestors returned to life was rejected when the newcomers did not behave with the decorum of the honoured dead. Others thought they might be porcupines because

of their overall hairiness and ill temper, but many settled on the idea that they were frogs simply because there were so many of them.

The colonial encounter between Europeans and Tsimshian involved the clash of two distinct cultural systems, the head-on collision between different ways of knowing the world. While Europeans believed that humans existed as one of several biological divisions, Tsimshian classified people, along with all other natural things, by the nature of their souls. The relative correctness of these classificatory systems is less important than the resolute conviction of their adherents, a faith that emerges from the embodied cultural memory of a world both inherited and lived in. Just like the Thangmi, the Tsimshian and the Europeans knew their worlds because they experienced them as performed in ritual and everyday life.

Communities with oral traditions demonstrate our human capacity to formalize and solidify memory over generations.<sup>1</sup> In a world of textual documents, we might not think of oral knowledge as easily standardized, but the Tsimshian have built an intellectual edifice of orally transmitted narratives that recount the detailed history of their families since the Pleistocene. Although Western scholars and courts of law have questioned how stories told only as oral narratives can possibly be historically accurate, recent archaeological work has shown that Tsimshian narratives correctly recount millennia of history. Indeed, Tsimshian oral stories create a remembered and certain history that integrates thousands of people into a singular network of knowledge. The narratives tell the histories of genealogical lineages, migrations, and the many political and social events of their history, all framed in oral accounts of the interactions between human and

nonhuman souls. Each family owns its stories and its versions of regional events, integrating them into the whole, rather like a complex weaving, to create the broad tapestry of Tsimshian history.

Memory is also key to understanding legal claims in Tsimshian society because what has been remembered is both tradition and law. Under the Tsimshian system, memory becomes both standardized and distributed. In this way, the iconic art of the Indigenous Northwest Coast serves as a mnemonic inventory of history, with each image referencing a story to be remembered. In ceremonial feasts, the narratives of history are remembered by re-enactment, creating the legal and moral precedents on which Tsimshian society is built. These texts are in some cases now written down, taking on new lives as artifacts replacing and sometimes resisted by the continuation of memory via performance.

This is increasingly the case for the Thangmi, who have sought to codify their often disparate oral traditions into singular forms, such as dictionaries and written religious texts, that can help advance their claims of recognition vis-à-vis both the Indian and Nepali states. This is a conscious act: most Thangmi agree that core cultural knowledge cannot be fully embodied in text, yet they know they must engage with textual forms to interact with the nation-states in which they live and the broader world around them. These are not contradictory “beliefs” but rather sophisticated strategies that embody the double consciousness necessary for Indigenous survival today.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, for the Tsimshian, the conversion of oral tradition via performance to text and recording is part of an effort to overcome the cultural genocide of the Indian residential school system, which purposely removed children



from their families to prevent them from making the memories that would be the foundation of experiencing and knowing their culture.

Walter J. Ong, an American Jesuit priest, philosopher, and professor of English literature, has said that “thinking of oral tradition ... as ‘oral literature’ is rather like thinking of horses as automobiles without wheels.”<sup>3</sup> This statement underscores the central question of how best to understand memory in relation to orality and textuality, challenging the presumed linear movement between these modes of recording the past. Yet the late John Miles Foley, an American professor of folklore and oral tradition, has argued that our oldest and newest technologies of communication can be considered as fundamentally equivalent in many ways. Where textual literature tends to constrain communication to a series of relationships between an author and a reader, oral and digital platforms promote iterative and lateral connections in which information is transmitted quickly within and between groups, mimicking the practice of collective rituals. In this way, Internet technologies and oral traditions share a core dynamic, enabling disparate individuals to navigate rich social networks to create patterns of meaning.<sup>4</sup> Both technologies foster co-creative, participatory, and ever-emergent experiences in which deeply embedded memories and new experiences are brought together to create cultural coherence.

In the rapid emergence of digital platforms, ideas and shared beliefs are largely informal. Like minds find one another along the paths of least resistance, and we have seen recent examples of how this dynamic can be exploited to target individuals with fabricated information in an attempt to persuade them towards specific political views. Our vulnerability to persuasion is less about facts and more

about whether specific ideas conform to pre-existing expectations that emerge from conscious and embedded memory. As illustrated by societies that rely on oral traditions, memory, when effectively harnessed, can chart the course of social change.

The Thangmi categorically identify themselves as a people without text. They are not to be confused, however, for a people without history – or memory. Rather, it is the finely tuned practice of oral remembering that has enabled the Thangmi – like the Tsimshian – to maintain distinctive identities against all odds. For both groups, memory is maintained through cultural practices that create a sense of belonging and participation, regardless of the media in which such experiences are encoded and transmitted. Whereas the Tsimshian harness the power of memory into formal oral structures that scaffold their legal, social, and scientific scholarship across generations, the Thangmi perpetuate memory in response to the modern state, reinvigorating their oral traditions through adaptation. Both systems are changing under pressure from new technologies that reform, fracture, and reassemble the collective work of remembering via experiences of what it means to be member of a specific culture. Social media, which has transformed the world in less than a generation, uses sophisticated technology to replicate techniques that humans have employed for thousands of years to express and shape their shared cultural memory of the world around them. As they have since the beginning of humanity, the ebbs and flows of experience and storytelling will consolidate, endure, and transform who we remember ourselves to be.

NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Andrew Martindale, Susan Marsden, Katherine Patton, Angela Ruggles, Bryn Letham, Kisha Supernant, David Archer, Duncan McLaren, and Kenneth M. Ames, "The Role of Small Villages in Northern Tsimshian Territory from Oral and Archaeological Records," *Journal of Social Archaeology* 17, 3 (2017): 285–325.
- <sup>2</sup> See Sara Shneiderman, *Rituals of Ethnicity: Thangmi Identities between Nepal and India* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).
- <sup>3</sup> Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen and Co., 1982), 12.
- <sup>4</sup> John Miles Foley, *Oral Tradition and the Internet: Pathways of the Mind* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017).