



**JOURNAL OF DYNAMICS
AND CONTROL**
VOLUME 8 ISSUE 8

ORAL NARRATIVES AND THE MAKING
OF HISTORY: STREAMLINING PAST
AND UNDERSTANDING CHALLENGES

Dr. Prem Kumar Sharma¹,
Mrs. Sangeeta Magar²

¹Head, Assistant Professor, Department of History

²Assistant Professor, Department of English
Himalayan University, Jollang - 791113

ORAL NARRATIVES AND THE MAKING OF HISTORY: STREAMLINING PAST AND UNDERSTANDING CHALLENGES

Dr. Prem Kumar Sharma¹, Mrs. Sangeeta Magar²

¹Head, Assistant Professor, Department of History, ²Assistant Professor, Department of English
Himalayan University, Jollang - 791113

ABSTRACT: *Oral narratives serve as a cornerstone of tribal cultures worldwide, serving to preserve and transmit their history, lineage, achievements, and the entirety of their cultural and societal fabric through spoken traditions. The profound significance of these oral narratives in tribal societies is indisputable, highlighting an inseparable bond between the narratives and the identity of these communities. As such, tribes maintain a wealth of oral accounts that encompass their past, cultural practices, myths, and much more. While the collection and documentation of these oral narratives present a significant undertaking, their integration into the construction of historical narratives presents distinct challenges. Attempting to reconstruct the history of tribal societies without embracing and interpreting their oral traditions is a futile endeavor. Therefore, it becomes imperative to explore methodologies that facilitate the incorporation and critical analysis of oral traditions in the process of recreating the historical narratives of these peoples. This paper endeavors to delve into the complexities inherent in working with oral narratives within the framework of historical as well as literary perspectives. It seeks to illuminate the inherent issues and dilemmas encountered when attempting to reconcile oral traditions with conventional historical methodologies. Furthermore, the study aims to delineate effective approaches for harnessing the richness of tribal heritage through a holistic perspective. However, integrating oral narratives into historical discourse demands careful consideration of methodological rigor and interpretative frameworks. The authenticity and reliability of oral accounts often passed down through generations, pose challenges in terms of verification and contextualization within broader historical contexts. Scholars must navigate issues such as the potential for embellishment or distortion over time, as well as the diversity of perspectives and interpretations inherent in oral storytelling traditions. The study of oral narratives within tribal cultures represents a compelling frontier in historical scholarship, offering insights into the complexities of memory, identity, and the transmission of cultural heritage. By critically examining the challenges and opportunities oral traditions present, this paper aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how these narratives can enrich and expand our interpretations of tribal histories.*

KEYWORDS: *Oral Narratives, Oral tradition, Tribal Culture, History, North East India.*

1. INTRODUCTION

“Tete ka asom ene Kakyere”

Ancient things remain in the ear.

-Akan (Ghana proverb)¹

The proverb suggests that historical or traditional knowledge, stories, or songs persist and continue to influence us, even if they originate from the distant past. It implies that the echoes of ancient

wisdom or cultural practices are still heard and felt in the present, impacting our understanding and experience. These stories dictate to a great level so as to what we believe in and thus, make us who we are.

Oral narratives make an appearance only when they are remembered, told to an audience, as narratives from the past. But this past is real and exists in the memories as the repository of human experiences. These narratives are a transmission of human experiences, that are at least a generation old, passed on by word of mouth until it is disappeared.² These are indicators of past conditions, a constituent of historical perception, but not history. John Fage and David Tait called it *quasi-historical* when they stated that oral tradition is, in reality, an explanation of existing or of currently relevant past, social or socio-political relationships.³ As a historian we look into the past from the present, but as Romila Thapar said, “choosing a particular item from the past and recreating it as a variant is in part, an act of historical significance.”⁴ She further argues that the past is viewed from the present, wherever the present may be located, and that which is selected from the past goes into constructing a history. While writing about the narratives and the making of history, she further writes that, the narratives were never handed down intact from generation to generation and the items selected from the past are often so chosen as to legitimize the values and codes of the present.⁵ While understanding this idea of oral narratives, the article tries to explain how the oral narratives can be adopted in the construction of the past as well as the challenges and opportunities that lies within the domain of oral narratives.

2. ORAL NARRATIVES AND ORAL TRADITIONS

An oral narrative is a genre of oral literature that involves recounting events, people, and places through spoken stories. These narratives can be either fictional (non-factual) or non-fictional (factual). It refers to stories or accounts that are transmitted verbally from one person to another. These narratives can take many forms, including myths, legends, folktales, fables, and personal anecdotes. We can observe that repetition of phrases, motifs, and structures are common in oral narratives. This helps the narrator remember the story and makes it easier for listeners to follow and remember. However, these narratives can change slightly with each narrator which actually allows the narrative to remain relevant and engaging. Such transformation of the narratives might include questions, participation, or feedback during the performance. Techniques such as rhythm, rhyme, and alliteration are often used to aid memorization and enhance the storytelling experience. Oral narratives are deeply embedded in the cultural and social context of the community and often reflect and reinforce the values, beliefs, and customs of the culture in which they are told. Unlike written texts, oral narratives can have a more fluid structure. The

sequence of events or the details of the story might shift, allowing for improvisation and adaptation based on the audience or context.

So, can it be called oral traditions? To discuss to understand the difference between oral tradition and oral narratives, first, we have to understand what is oral tradition? In the words of Jan Vansina, oral traditions are verbal testimonies which are reported statements from the past which must be orally transmitted or sung. According to him, not all narratives are oral traditions, but only those which are statements which have been transmitted from generation to generation.⁶ In simple words, it refers to the practice of passing down cultural knowledge, stories, beliefs, customs, and histories through spoken word from one generation to the next. It is an umbrella term that encompasses the entire process of storytelling and verbal communication that preserves and transmits a culture's heritage and collective memory without relying on written records. It often involves the narration of myths, legends, folktales, and historical accounts which can serve to entertain, educate, and instill values within a community. During the recitation of these oral traditions during significant events or celebrations, frequent rituals, songs, chants, and ceremonies are performed, helping to reinforce cultural practices and social norms. And, that is why it can be said that these are crucial for preserving languages, cultural practices, and historical knowledge, especially in societies where writing systems may not be used or where written records are scarce. These are also flexible, allowing stories and practices to evolve over time which simultaneously helps them remain relevant to contemporary audiences while retaining core elements of cultural identity.

Now, coming back to the question of difference between oral narratives and oral traditions, we can observe that both are related concepts which refer to different aspects of verbal communication and cultural transmission. But as Jan Vansina pointed that not all narratives are oral traditions, we see some differences in a specific way. While understanding oral traditions, Jan Vansina describes that there are two types of oral traditions maintained by non-literate societies. The first is the tradition which are in fixed form and are learnt by heart and transmitted as they stand; and, the second are in free form and not learnt by heart and which everyone transmits his/her own way.⁷ He further describes that the fixed type of tradition is that oral tradition which is in the form of poem and each words of which belongs to the tradition; whereas, the free type of tradition is in the form of narrative which includes the contribution of the narrator.⁸ Oral narratives are specific stories or accounts shared through spoken word. These include myths, legends, folktales, fables, and personal anecdotes. Whereas, oral tradition encompasses the broader practice and process of transmitting cultural knowledge and values through spoken word across generations. The focus of

the narratives is on individual stories or accounts and their content, structure, and style whereas, the focus of oral tradition is on the overall system and practice of oral transmission, including how stories, customs, rituals, and knowledge are passed down. The main content of oral narratives are the actual stories being told and often contain particular plots, characters, themes, and moral lessons. On the other hand, oral tradition includes the narratives themselves but also involves rituals, songs, proverbs, and other forms of verbal expression. The oral narratives serve to entertain, instruct, or preserve historical and cultural knowledge through storytelling. Whereas, oral traditions serve to preserve and transmit cultural heritage, establish social norms, and reinforce community identity. It includes the methodology of storytelling, the social roles involved in it, including how stories are told, who tells them, the role of storytelling in ceremonies, and the ways in which cultural values are reinforced through verbal communication. In simple words, oral narratives are the specific stories shared within an oral tradition, oral tradition refers to the entire practice and process of preserving and transmitting cultural knowledge through spoken word. Oral narratives are a component of oral tradition, which encompasses a wider range of verbal practices and cultural functions.

3. ORAL NARRATIVES AND ORAL HISTORY

Oral narratives and oral history are related concepts but have distinct differences; oral narratives are stories passed down through generation, often involving myths, legends, folklore, and personal anecdotes. They often serve to entertain, convey moral lessons, or preserve cultural values. It can be fictional or embellished, focusing more on storytelling than factual accuracy. Whereas, Oral history record accounts or personal experiences and events from individuals who have lived through specific historical moments. It aims to document and preserve factual accounts of the past from the perspective of those who have experienced it. It focuses on real events and provide insights into historical contexts and personal perspectives, often used for academic and research purpose.

David Henige defines oral traditions as those recollections of the past that are commonly or universally known in a given culture.⁹ According to him the oral traditions which are not widely known should be considered as testimony, and if they relate to historical events they belong to the realm of history. Therefore, he describes oral history as a method of examining the recent past by collecting and analyzing life stories and personal recollections where informants speak about their own experiences that provide insight into historical events and personal narratives.¹⁰ To

summaries, oral narratives are more about cultural storytelling, while oral history is concerned with preserving accurate historical accounts through personal recollections.

4. ORAL NARRATIVES AND THE MAKING OF HISTORY: SHAPING HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDING

Oral narratives are characterized by their use of spoken language rather than written texts. They can vary in structure, style, and content, depending on the cultural context and the storyteller's preferences. In many cultures, oral storytelling is a highly respected art form and a key way of preserving and sharing knowledge. There are communities in the society which remained illiterate for a longer period of time and thus does not offer us a written history. However, they preserve it in their memories in the form of oral narratives - legends, myths, folktales, folklores, and so forth. We cannot look away from this calling it illiterate as these traditions are part of the literature of such communities. In fact, such traditions speak of the past, origin of the communities or of all the native communities. One way or the other, the oral narratives are responsible for the reconstruction of the written histories as we can observe that mostly written histories are largely derived from the oral narratives.

Upon retelling, these narratives become contesting versions of an event with variations with different narratives. Jan Vansina suggested that that among the narratives that are retold and repeated, a historian must recognize that there are two major groups of communication, one presenting “news” and the other representing “interpretation” of existing situations. Here, the news does not concern the past and it is about the present. The latter does not deal with the news, but in Van Jansina's words, it is “the expression of experience.” These are the reflections of the events and the messages that elaborate the historical consciousness about the situation at a given time.

The oral narratives have been retold from generation to generation, and with time several other narratives were incorporated within them, resulting in changes in the plots and sequences of the episodes of the events. In some of the narratives, it is, even, very difficult to find what are the new inputs in the original one or even to assume which is the original one. We can understand this with an example of traditions of origin stories. There are origin stories of every community in the world that describe their community's beginning, the creation of their world, etc. Such traditions are called myths. At first, these narratives originated out of speculation, some out of pre-existing theories, or some borrowed from other communities. These origin stories or myths are heavily

influenced from generation to generation and may or may not remain constant in their plot throughout time. As such, narratives are bound to develop with variations with time. However, this does not necessarily imply that with multiple transmission comes multiple distortion of the narrative. In some cases, it is the reverse. Now, what happens, when the narratives passed on through a single agent it more or less remains the same, even if it is false or not accurate. But, on the other hand, when it passes through multiple agents, a lot of inputs, alterations, are there which actually gave better control of accuracy of information to the narrative.

5. ORAL NARRATIVES AND THE MAKING OF HISTORY: AREAS AND NEED

“Until the lion tells the story, the hunter will always be the hero” -African Proverb

The proverb highlights the importance of perspective in shaping narratives and historical accounts. It suggests that the dominant or more powerful voice often dictates how stories are told and remembered. The “hunter” represents those in power; those who control the narrative. Meanwhile, the “lion” symbolizes the marginalized or less powerful, whose perspectives and experiences might be overlooked or ignored. until these marginalized voices are given the opportunity to share their side of the story, the prevailing narrative will remain incomplete and biased.

Oral narratives can significantly enhance the study of history by addressing gaps left by traditional records. They serve as complimentary sources, offering details and perspectives often missing from written documents, particularly in cultures where such records are limited. These narratives provide alternative viewpoints, especially from marginalized or underrepresented groups, enriching mainstream historical accounts. They also contribute valuable cultural and social context, helping historians understand the emotional and societal dimensions of historical events. By capturing personal experiences and local traditions, oral narratives offer a more personalized and nuanced view of history. Furthermore, they play a key role in preserving cultural heritage by documenting myths, legends and evolving traditions, which helps to maintain a broader understanding of societal values and changes. Oral narrative also shapes collective memory, influencing how communities remember and interpret their past and offering diverse perspectives that can also challenge dominant historical narratives.

Additionally, they enhance historical methodology by providing evidence that can corroborate or refine other sources by introducing innovative research approaches. Overall, oral narratives play a crucial role in creating a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of history.

We can understand at this point that these oral narratives as, in the words of Jan Vansina, “verbal messages which are reported statements from the past beyond the present generation.”¹¹ The narratives, from historical point of view, can be observed as a series of successive events of which the previous ones were lost or may have been infused in the latest one while transmission over a period. As discussed above, the transmission of oral narratives throughout a longer period of time may be beneficial or may not, a historian should trace the earliest narrative and examine that with the latest rather than staying content to what the historian had observed. It is obvious that the narrator wants to communicate their past with us, and also, according to them it is genuine but the historian must decode and testify the same.

An oral narrative, which is partly a historical narrative, describes about the events or sequences of events or a situation from the past. It can also be observed that it is an opinion held by a community about the event from their end. Therefore, the narratives may or may not substantiate the facts and need not relate to the actual events or observations as they are derived from the generalizations made by the contemporaries. Therefore, a historian must understand that some of these narratives are in fact nothing but expressions of generalizations; and, can mislead while reconstructing an historical event.

In historical research, by incorporating oral narratives, historians can gain access to perspectives and experiences that are often overlooked in written records. These narratives provide insights into the lives of the illiterate, subaltern and marginalized society, of whom we do not have the recorded past, which fills the gaps in the historical record. Also, these narratives can offer alternative interpretations of historical events, challenging established viewpoints. The recorded data may speak of a different situation and on the other hand the narratives of the unrecorded community may speak a of different. Hence, it is crucial for the historian to corroborate the oral narrative with the existing documents or records.

6. WRITING HISTORY WITH ORAL NARRATIVES: UNDERSTANDING CHALLENGES

Oral narratives, while offering unique insights into the past, presents significant challenges for historians. Human memory is fallible and subject to distortion over time. People may forget details,

conflate events, or even unintentionally fabricate information. As it is discussed above, oral narratives tend to transform with different stages of transmission and with different agents of transmission. A historian must be careful and understand these limitations while working with oral narratives. Secondly, these narratives are inherently subjective, reflecting the narrator's personal perspective, biases, and interpretations, which can skew the historical record. There will be biases in the narratives according to the narrator. They may often remember events that reinforce their narratives, leading to selective recall and omission of crucial details. They may be influenced by social norms and expectations, leading them to present themselves and their experiences in a favorable light. The historian must recognize the potential for biasness in oral narratives and critically evaluate the information presented.

Moreover, Oral narratives often pose a threat towards accuracy and reliability as oral narratives are subject to memory lapses, distortions, or embellishments over time, which can affect their accuracy. They can be highly subjective as these narratives often reflect personal perspectives and biases, which may not always align with factual historical accounts.

Furthermore, Oral narratives often lack external evidence or supporting documentation to corroborate the details provided, making it difficult for historians to verify the accuracy of information and place it within a broader historical context. Further, this may vary across cultures, affecting the way information is transmitted and interpreted. Different oral narratives about the same event can conflict, complicating the task of determining which version is more reliable or accurate. Hence, making the variability of the oral narratives presents multiple outcomes of the events, and this with the lack of supporting documentation, historians cannot come to a conclusion, and they will not be able to testify to the facts that are narrated.

The other big challenge is that of consent and representation; researchers must navigate ethical considerations related to consent, representation, and the potential exploitation of oral narrators. It is important to acknowledge and address power imbalances, ensuring that narrators are not exploited for their narratives. It is must that the representation of the narrators' stories must be done in ways that honors their context and perspectives, rather than distorting or misinterpreting their experiences.

One of the major problems while working with oral narratives in the documentation of history is the narrator itself. The oral narratives are vulnerable to loss through the death of narrators or the

degradation of recordings which can make it difficult to access and analyze the narratives. Accuracy in transcription: as transcribing oral narratives can result in loss of nuance or misinterpretation, especially if the transcription is not done carefully. It can result in translation issues as well. Translating oral narratives from one language to another can lead to misunderstanding or misinterpretations of the original content.

The disinterest of younger generations in traditional practices poses a risk to cultural identity, as cultural heritage is often passed down through oral traditions and rituals. Without education and engagement, younger generation is becoming disconnect from their cultural roots, resulting in cultural erosion. Modernization and globalization are overshadowing these traditions, leading to diminished appreciation and lack of interest towards their cultural identity resulting in the death of the next generation of oral narrators.

Furthermore, the problem of bias is also noteworthy, as the narratives which are documented from the narrator may focus only on specific groups or individuals, limiting their representativeness of the broader population. The selection of which oral narrative to include can itself introduce bias, affecting the overall portrayal of history.

Physical and Technological Limitations: Oral narratives may be recorded in formats that are not easily preserved or accessible, leading to potential loss of valuable historical information. It also faces a huge problem of; Underrepresentation: Oral narratives from marginalized or less accessible communities might be underrepresented in historical record which can lead to gaps in historical record.

Addressing these challenges require careful methodological approaches, including corroborating oral narratives with other sources, being mindful of biases, while also considering the cultural context of the narrative.

7. CONCLUSION

The inclusion of oral narratives is essential for capturing the full spectrum of human experience and ensuring a more holistic representation of history.

Oral narratives play a crucial role in the construction of history, offering invaluable insights that complement and enrich traditional historical records. These narratives provide a unique perspective by capturing the lived experiences, cultural practices, and social contexts often omitted from written documents. They serve as a vital source of information, especially in societies where written records are sparse or non-existent, filling gaps and offering alternative viewpoints that might otherwise be overlooked. Through oral narratives, historians gain access to the personal and collective memories of individuals, which help illuminate the nuances of historical events and social dynamics.

Moreover, oral narratives are instrumental in preserving cultural heritage. They convey myths, legends, and traditions that embody the values and beliefs of a community, thereby maintaining a continuous link to the past. This preservation of cultural identity is crucial for understanding how societies evolve and how their traditions and beliefs adapt over time. By documenting these changes, oral narratives provide a broader and more inclusive view of history that incorporates diverse experiences and perspectives.

Despite these challenges, oral narratives are an invaluable source of information when used critically and in conjunction with other types of evidence. By carefully considering the limitations of oral narratives and employing rigorous methodological approaches, historians can extract valuable insights from these firsthand accounts. Oral narratives are not without their limitations and historians must approach them critically, considering factors such as memory, bias, and context. Therefore, it is essential to combine oral narratives with written documents, artifacts, and other forms of evidence to corroborate information, and analyze them within their historical and cultural context to understand the influences shaping the narrator's perspective.

However, utilizing oral narratives in the historical domain requires careful consideration of accuracy, context, and methodology. Historians must navigate challenges such as memory distortions, verification issues, cultural differences, and contextualization. Despite these challenges, oral narratives remain a powerful tool for crafting a more comprehensive historical record. They enable historians to engage with the past in a way that respects and acknowledges the voices of those who lived it, thus contributing to a richer and more diverse understanding of history.

REFERENCES

¹ Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, Wisconsin, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985, p.xi. *ibid.*, p. 3.

² Quoted in Elizabeth Tonkin's *Investigating Oral Tradition*, *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 17, No. 2, Special Issue in Honour of J D. Fage, 1986, p. 203.

³ Romila Thapar, *Narratives and the Making of History*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2000, p.4. *ibid.*

⁴ Jan Vansina, *op.cit.*, p.3.

⁵ Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*, Penguin Books, England, 1965, pp.22-23.

⁶ David P. Henige, *Oral Historiography*, Longman, The University of Michigan, 1982. P.2.

⁷ Jan Vansina, *op.cit.*, p.27.