

Oral Traditions Under Threat: The Australian Aboriginal Experience¹

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Many writers in Australia have written about the economic and social effects of the written tradition upon the various oral traditions of Australia, but few have addressed the inappropriateness of replacing the oral tradition with a written one. It is wrong to assume that the written word is a means of cultural preservation. What, in fact, is occurring is that the oral tradition in Australia is being supplanted by the written tradition.

In order to argue why the written tradition in Australia can only ever be an adjunct to an oral tradition and never a linchpin for its survival, one must examine the special relationship Aborigines have with the land. It is this special relationship that is the axiom of the environmental harmony that has persisted in Australia since time began. The crux of this relationship is that the Aborigines see themselves and everything in their worldview as being “of” the land rather than living “on” the land. To remove the oral tradition from “the land” and give it a new setting in a written text is to displace the life force of the culture.

There is a resurgence in popularity of new anthologies of Australian Aboriginal myths and legends. In general, the authors of these books are predominantly non-aboriginal, compiling them under the pretext that they are bringing to the average Australian a knowledge of the Aboriginal culture. Some even go so far as to say “recording it in written form would ensure that it was never lost.”²

These authors, however, are attempting to carry out an impossible task. It is a futile exercise to attempt to capture a living tradition and cut it off from its life force. In other words, to take a story from the land on which it was born and on which it is re-created in each telling demonstrates an ignorance of exactly what an Aboriginal story is, what it is connected to, and what it cannot be disconnected from.

This amounts to a new form of colonialism, unwittingly being propagated by the bearers of the written word. To capture Aboriginal stories and clothe them

in the new garb of written text, with the pretense of protection and survival, is a continuation of Western chauvinism.

Both Walter Ong³ and Albert Lord⁴ have written on the dichotomy between oral and written genres. Ong discusses the differences between the ways of managing knowledge and verbalization in both oral and literate cultures. He argues that it is difficult, if not impossible, for those of a literate culture to conceive of the “oral universe of communication.” Lord points out the dynamic character of oral tradition. Re-creation rather than re-production is what distinguishes the oral tradition from the written tradition. While these two authors have not focussed on Aboriginal orality, they do provide a framework for discussing the contrast between oral and written practices.

The written and oral traditions appear to be diametrically opposed; they emanate from two completely different sources. Ong espouses a similar argument in his book, *Orality and Literacy*. He has demonstrated the very distinctive features that separate the oral from the written. Ong’s thesis is a hard-hitting account of the paucity of the literate mind to appreciate the “oral universe of communication.”⁵ He argues that the literate mind attempts to perceive the oral in its own constructs by using such terms as “oral literature” and “text.” He sees this as incongruous and argues that to use such terms is “rather like thinking of horses as automobiles without wheels.”⁶

Ong, in a satirical mood, offers the following scenario to explain the inability of the literate to comprehend:

To dissociate words from writing is psychologically threatening, for literates’ sense of control over language; without dictionaries, written grammar rules, punctuation, and all the rest of the apparatus that makes words into something you can ‘look’ up, how can literates live?⁷

To justify his accusation, he develops his thesis to suggest just what it is that makes the oral form of communication so unique. He begins by explaining: “The spoken word is the thing—like repose of the written or printed word.”⁸

Ong also deals with the concept of sound. He sees it as “essentially evanescent.” As he states, “There is no way to stop sound and have sound.” He also accentuates the power associated with sound and the potency indigenous peoples place upon it. To indigenous peoples, the naming of a particular thing signifies “power” over the named entity.

Ong notes that when a speaker addresses an audience the audience is in “a unity” listening to the speaker. If the speaker, however, asks the audience to read a pamphlet that may have been handed out, each reader enters into his/her own private reading world and the unity is shattered. The literates’ world, he adds, “attempts to imitate the oral audience with such statements as ‘a collective readership’ of so and so, and this conjures up a sense of unity.” Literates are well aware of the basic human need for community.⁹

Although they are well aware of this need, they go out of their way to undermine it. By perpetuating the isolationist mentality, literacy allows the individual to interpret the text. This is diametrically opposed to the oral mode

in which it is the community which dictates and interprets the text. This point is only one of the many dynamic features that make up the creation and telling of a story.

Albert Lord, in *Singer of Tales*, challenges readers to cast aside the “literate snobberies bequeathed” to them during the Renaissance and asks that a fresh look be given to the oral tradition. He suggests that readers:

consider (the oral tradition) not as the inert acceptance of a fossilized corpus of theme and conventions, but as an organic habit of re-creating what has been received and is handed on.¹⁰

Having challenged the reader’s biases, he then goes on to put his assertions into context. This context is drawn from the collection of “contextual testimonies” he and his collaborators collected while studying what they call, “their living laboratory, the school of non-literate bards, surviving, yet declining in Yugoslavia and other South Slavic regions.”¹¹

The actual point of contact with the bards is the Turkish coffee house, the place of composition, performance, and transition of the tradition. This tradition elucidates the bards’ fabulous memories, filled with stock epithets and ornamental formulas.

Simultaneous singing and composing is the crux of the skill of a bard. The Yugoslavian bard sings at a very fast rate and the length of the composition depends on the audience reception. If they are interested, the epic is elaborated with what Lord calls “ornamental formulas.” However, if the audience is bored, the climax is reached quickly, if at all.

Such auditing by the singer of the audience’s reception requires the singer to be mentally alert at all times, as his composition must quickly be “re-written” if he is to keep his customers of the coffee house happy. This is also the point at which the audience begins to dictate the creativity or originality of the young unskilled bard and the experienced bard.

This creativity and originality, however, is under threat of extinction due to the enforcement of literacy. The raising of the status of the written word has infringed on the tradition of the singing bard. Lord further points out that literacy undermines the authenticity of the creation process by setting books up as the “true facts.” The young people are taught books are unchangeable and, therefore, real and factual.

The creativity of song singing is thus ignored and attention to accurate duplication becomes the vogue. As Lord observed, this new found literacy indeed sounded the deathknell of the oral process. The new singers were re-producers not re-creators of the tradition.

The insights provided by Ong and Lord demonstrate the cognitive uniqueness of the oral tradition and how the introduction of literacy, which is a diametrically opposed tradition, only leads to an eventual supplantation by the dominant literate tradition of the oral tradition. This displacement of the oral tradition is also happening in Australia. Assimilationist policies were introduced after Aborigines were granted citizenship in their own country in 1967. These policies have since been reviewed, but the mentality still persists, aided by the bearers of the written word.

Aboriginal Worldview

The Aboriginal worldview is that of an oral tradition as it has been conveyed to me.¹² I have attempted to maintain the purity of the orality by presenting it as I have heard it, which incorporates past, present and future as one.

In the continent of Australia a people evolved whose worldview emanated from their creation stories. This period is most popularly known as The Dreaming or, as the Arrente refer to it, the Time of Great Power.¹³ The Dreaming was the creation period when the ancestors created the land and all upon it. During this Time of Power, the laws of the land were formulated and the people and all upon it were instructed in those laws. The laws were such that everything upon the land was interrelated by societal relationships. Animals, the topography, and humans were all one, and the one emanated from the land. At the end of the creation period the creators either became part of the land or the cosmos.

To my people the creator beings are in the land. Their spirit is ever present in the land and can be called upon at any time, especially during ceremonial times when the ancestors are called upon to once again re-create the produce of the land. This led the people to develop a worldview that is land-centred, which in turn afforded environmental harmony and limited technological development and population size. Success in life was measured by the provision the earth supplied each year. This did not lead to a religious cult that worshipped the earth but to a highly spiritual society that valued social relationships and responsible behavior towards the very thing that gave them life. The earth was their mother not their goddess. Mothers are respected, not held up for adoration. Furthermore, the earth was tangible, not an abstract thought that demanded faith. The people perceived the earth as a living entity. They knew if they did not follow the laws of the land they would perish. To remind and guide the people, the laws were told through their stories and ceremonies.

This oneness in worldview did not mean a oneness of an ethnic group either, for there was great diversity in language and physique. This diversity occurred during the creation period as there were many creator beings, each creating its own particular dreaming tracks across a specific part of the land. Each clan was made custodian of a particular piece of land. The borders were defined by the dreaming tracks of the great ancestors. These tracks were documented in the stories and ceremonies. Each group had its own piece of custodial land, but also shared parts of other pieces of land with other groups. The essential point was that the provided land was the body of their ancestors. They grew out of that land and no other group could claim the land because it was like trying to claim someone else's body.

Social relationships were formulated in a way that all the groups which numbered over five hundred were interrelated through very strict marriage rules. To marry haphazardly was to cause an imbalance in the harmony of society as well as in the environment. Stories are the means to convey the laws of life, i.e., The Dreaming. They are also a vehicle for re-creating the Dreaming. This is an important facet of the Dreaming stories. In Aboriginal

societies such as the Arrente of central Australia, the Dreamtime was seen as the time of power. Arrente Dreaming stories are told, danced, and sung with the intention of re-creating the Dreaming or power. Every time the Dreaming is re-enacted, it is re-created. Or, to put it another way, every time the Arrente women re-enact the Honeyant Dreaming, they are creating the honeyants and the food supply associated with it.¹⁴

Therefore, the process of re-creation rather than re-production is essential to the reality of the Aborigines. Re-production is essential to the reality of the Aborigines. Re-production is unreal while re-creation is real. Another essential factor about these stories is that they are particular to their areas and are not transportable (other than minor generalized stories). Stories are seen as being passed down from the creator beings and state how to care for that particular tract of land and how that particular group of people must behave. The Adnyamathanha explanation of the significance of stories is an example that can be generalized to encompass all Aboriginal cultures within Australia:¹⁵

. . . for the people, the stories are the land. In the language telling a story means simply telling the land (Yarta).

The land is seen as the outward expression of the spiritual dimension. Evidence for the existence of that dimension is there in concrete form and it is the mythology which interprets those forms to the people.¹⁶

To isolate a narrative from its roots is in some sense to destroy its soul and to deprive it of its real meaning.¹⁷

A human being is a vehicle for the telling of a story. However, the story cannot be told without the land if the audience is to have complete comprehension. To talk of the great emu and the eggs it lays means nothing unless you can see the piece of topography that depicts this event, a group of copper green boulders.

This knowledge is called “assumed knowledge.” Williams in her book depicting the Yolngu people explains:¹⁸

A Yolngu speaker can give a few concrete referents and expect his Yolngu listener to supply the implied meanings because of the knowledge of symbolisms which he can assume they both share. To give but one example. If a Yolngu man relates a segment of myth such as: “Mosquito (a particular species) thrust his proboscis into the ground at (place name) where the mound now exists,” he can rely on his listeners supplying the following, at the very least.¹⁹

Williams then goes on to comprise a seven point list covering such concepts as: Mosquito’s spirit-being status, its Dreaming track, the kinship relationship, the spear that corresponds to the proboscis, the use of the spear, the physical and geographic symbolism, and the ritual association of the act of thrusting the proboscis. This is the least amount of “assumed knowledge” required of the audience before they are deemed fit to listen.

If these, then, are the minimum criteria required of the Yolngu audience, how foolish are the anthologists who feel they are capable of giving insights in written form to an audience as broad as the general public of Australia. To do this is to deny the essential orality and the importance of the land in the continual re-creation of Aboriginal stories.

Critique

Such chauvinism as evidenced by the anthologists is a common feature among literates when dealing with oral societies. Colonialism, with all its associated values, is a prime example. While Ong has given us helpful insights throughout his book, in his final chapter, "Some Theorems," he offers an argument which these chauvinists could well use as justification for their behavior.²⁰

This argument amounts to a contradiction of his previous findings. One of the theorems offered is that orality is not an ideal state and that it is only with writing that human existence can reach its full potential. He further maintains that he does not know of any oral culture that does not want to achieve literacy as soon as possible.

Speaking from an Aboriginal perspective, I would dispute both of these claims. I take issue with his assertions about the concepts of "human existence" and "full potential." When Ong speaks of human existence, he is taking it from a materialist or object-oriented point of view rather than from a spiritual or word-orientated one. Yes, indeed, one needs pen and paper, material objects, if one wishes to continue to create material objects. These material objects are a reflection of the person who made them. It is very fashionable to build a house or buy a car that reflects one's personality. It is also the way in which literates demonstrate their power. The more material objects they can possess or create, the more powerful they are. This is in opposition to the oral tradition where words symbolize power, and where cohesive human relationships are the signs of strength and power. This totally different attitude to power is reflected in modern-day society where indigenous peoples are seen as irresponsible when they place caring and sharing before material gain.

Turning to the concept of "full potential," Ong claims humans can only reach their true intellectual achievement through abstract thinking which is aided by literacy. This he later alludes to as "a true sense of self."²¹ The phrase "intellectual achievement" needs to be limited to an intellectualism that sees man (not humans) as the pinnacle of creation and leads to the invention of objects that are made in man's own image. In oral societies such as those of the Australian Aborigines, intellectualism or higher levels of understanding of the world around them and how to manipulate the forces of energy in the world are carried out through contemplation rather than through the use of material aids.

Ong's second argument assures the reader that no oral tradition would resist literacy; however, Ong has had little opportunity to observe a resisting oral tradition as there is little chance of resistance in an overt manner because the written tradition, in hand with colonialism, has forced itself upon most oral traditions.

In Australia, the “out station” movement is an attempt by Aborigines to return to their homelands, to revive their traditional ways of living, and to avoid the European influence upon their culture. It is an example of passive resistance against what has been forced on their oral tradition. The oral societies know that in order to get their daily bread, literacy is essential. However, that daily bread, which the literates provide, does not bring dignity and pride of culture. If there were a choice, such as the continuation of the barter system, I would seriously doubt the eagerness of such societies for literacy.

To his credit, Ong encourages further debate along these lines and suggests that there are countless unknown questions involved in what we now know about orality and literacy. His final statement is most encouraging: “Orality-literacy dynamics enter integrally into the modern evolution of consciousness toward both greater interiorization and greater openness.”²²

The increased numbers on the popular literature scene of the publication of new anthologies of Australian Aboriginal myths ignores the importance of the oral tradition. The authors maintain that by publishing these stories they are somehow bringing about an understanding of Aboriginal culture and more importantly the preservation of the Aboriginal culture for posterity. Transferring such stories into a written literature does not preserve them for posterity; rather, it captures them and renders them into the status of dead, past history, not as it is, a living and vital tradition.

To present a story out of its geographical context shows a gross misunderstanding of exactly what an Aboriginal story is. A human being is a vehicle for the telling, and the story cannot be told without the land, the very thing that gives it life.

This concept may be very difficult for literates to understand for books isolate them from the environment. For example, they believe that by reading a book about the rainforest they *know* the rainforest. This detached thinking has led to the destruction of rainforests. To feel the rainforest is to know the rainforest. Or as Graham has so poetically phrased it:

Passion and sentiment come through feeling which
leads to spiritual knowledge, which is true knowledge.²³

Once there has been physical contact, then, and only then, can a true comprehension come about. This comprehension would lead to the cessation of the demand for those commodities that require timber products from the rainforest. Yet Western societies are doing little to curb the demand that calls for the cutting of the trees.

To understand the environment within which literates live, a “re-connection” with the environment is necessary. This analogy is an attempt to elucidate the importance of maintaining context. To believe that one can take a story or even a tree from the place from which it was born demonstrates a total lack of understanding of the environment from which the things were grown.

Conclusion

There is a very special relationship Aboriginal people have with the land and their stories are intrinsic to that harmony. This harmony which has existed

since time began has in recent times been disrupted by the enforcement on Aboriginal people of the literate tradition, a tradition that is the complete antithesis of the Aboriginal tradition, and more importantly, environmental harmony.

Aborigines, however, are attempting to take control of their children's destiny by setting up their own community schools. These schools are run by the elders of the community. Most of the education consists of developing skills to live harmoniously in the environment—an environment that white Australians refer to as “hostile” and “uninhabitable.”

By reviewing the works of Ong and Lord, the inappropriateness and the inability of the literate tradition to supplant successfully the oral tradition is clear. Such attempts by the literates in the past have only led to disharmony among the people and a continuation of Western chauvinism. The ideal scenario is one in which oral societies are seen as centers of learning wherein literates may learn first hand how the indigenous population interprets the world: to understand that they belong to their environment, and not, as most believe, that the environment belongs to them.

Notes

¹I am grateful for the helpful comments offered by Dr. E. Conrad, Mrs. T. Jackson, and Ms. M. Graham as I worked through the issues discussed in the article.

²Bill Neidjie, Stephen Davis, B. Allan Fox, *Kakadu Man . . . Bill Neidjie*, (Darwin: Resource Managers, 1986).

³Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (New York: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1982).

⁴Albert Lord, *Singer of Tales* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960).

⁵Ong, 2.

⁶Ong, 12.

⁷Ong, 14.

⁸Ong, 75.

⁹Ong, 74.

¹⁰Lord, xiii.

¹¹Lord, xv.

¹²My grandmother's clan are the Kombumerri, and my grandfather's clan are the Munaljahli of the east coast of Australia.

¹³The Arrente people are an Aboriginal clan from Australia's central desert region.

¹⁴Nancy Williams, *The Yolngu and Their Land* (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1986).

¹⁵The Adnyamathanha People and Dorothy Tunbridge, *Flinders Rangers Dreaming* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1988).

¹⁶Tunbridge, xxxv.

¹⁷Tunbridge, xxx.

¹⁸Williams.

¹⁹Yolngu is the word used by Aboriginal clans of the Northern Territory when referring to themselves as an ethnic group.

²⁰Ong, 175.

²¹Ong, 179.

²²Ong, 179.

²³Mary Graham is a Kombumerri and lecturer in Aboriginal philosophy at Queensland University. She and Ms. Lilla Watson are co-authoring a book on Aboriginal philosophy which is soon to be published in Australia.

Critique

In her essay, Christine Morris addresses an important topic in the study of ethnic relations: the relationship between the written word and the oral tradition. She points out that studies often concentrate on the economic and social effects that the written tradition has on oral cultures; however, the ethics of this process has been ignored in research. Morris examines this aspect of the relationship and argues that the replacement of the oral tradition with the written word is a continuation of western chauvinism that has been the basis of the European conquest of aboriginal cultures in the world. The replacement of the oral with the written is thus a form of colonialism—although very subtle—in its argument to protect and save oral traditions for posterity. But the written word can only supplement the oral tradition; it cannot—and it *should not*—supplant orality.

To illustrate her argument, Morris looks at the case of the Australian aborigines. Their oral tradition emerges from their close relationship with the land they live on, and therefore, it cannot be fully understood in a written form. Storytelling is part of the land; when stories are separated from their life force and written down on paper, they lose their recreative capacity and become mere reproductions. It is this diametric opposition that best explains the difference between the two traditions. They emanate from two different sources and thus cannot replace each other. In western cultures, values are material and power emanates from material things; written word is invested with extreme importance and has value over spoken words. In contrast, oral cultures place more