

ORAL LITERATURE – AN ART FORM FROM IMMEMORIAL TIME

What is Oral Heritage? – working definitions

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In order to accurately answer the question above, there is a need to offer a conceptual framework and critical analysis of some keywords, such as culture, tradition, heritage, folklore and memory, as they support and complement one another. Therefore, I will try to provide answers not only to the prior question, but also to the following ones: In what way(s) does oral heritage form a part of culture? What is meant by culture? How reliable can oral heritage be? Is oral heritage a valid means of conveying culture and, thus, a collective representation of identity? Are heritage and tradition the same?

To start with, I believe that it is of great importance to reflect upon the notion of culture, as it is an all-encompassing concept, which will provide us with a better understanding of how culture has been shaped by oral heritage and, conversely, how culture has affected the development of such phenomenon.

Raymond Williams' complaint "I don't know how many times I've wished that I'd never heard the damned word" (Bennett et al, 2005: 63), while referring to culture, is justified by the fact that it is one of the most difficult terms to define in any language. Actually, debates among various intellectuals have been held around this term since it was first used in the Old French language of the Middle Ages, at a time when it was linked to religious connotations "to indicate a religious cult, or religious worship or ceremony" (Rocher, 1988: 46). Furthermore, for a long time, in its most generic sense, the word culture in Latin – *cultura* (from the root word *colere*), as well as in all the other languages which borrowed the root, was also associated with the primary meaning of cultivation. With respect to this, Williams writes that "[c]ultura took on the main meaning of cultivation or tending, though with subsidiary medieval meanings of honour and worship" (1976: 77).

If "in all its uses [culture] was a noun of process: the tending of something, basically crops or animals" (ibidem), sometime around the sixteenth century the term gained a metaphoric meaning, becoming commonly used to designate the nurturing of human children. Later, in the eighteenth century, it attained social and historical dimensions when German intellectuals borrowed the term *Cultur* from French, spelling it then *Kultur*, and adapted it to define "... progress, the improvement of the human spirit, a step towards the perfection of humanity. Others used it to mean 'civilization,' that is, the refinement of mores, customs, and knowledge" (Rocher, 1988: 46). In other words, and according to the anthropologists Kroeber and Kluckhohn, in the second half of the eighteenth century the German concept of *Kultur* emerged, having grown out of the older meaning and coming to signify then "the distinctive 'higher' values or enlightenment of a society" (1952: 67).

It was not until the nineteenth century, though, that the definition of culture was put under the deep scrutiny of intellectual elites. As a result of such intense examination, in 1871, Tylor attempted to isolate and clarify this concept in his major work *Primitive Culture* and gave birth to the first formal definition of the term in the opening sentence of his book: "Culture, or civilization, ... is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Tylor cited in Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1952: 81). Noteworthy here was the assumption, by that time, that culture is acquired within communities of practice and it is not something inborn or hereditary.

If this period was marked by the beginning of an anthropologic/ethnographic discourse, in the twentieth century it hit a crescendo, the term culture was correlated not only with a class dimension, but also with gender and ethnic boundaries. As an example, I would like to quote Sapir's definition of culture in 1921: "culture (...) is (...) the socially inherited assemblage of practices and beliefs that determines the texture of our lives..." (cited in ibidem: 89). Another quote worth sharing is by Radcliffe-Brown, in 1949: "[Culture is] the process by which in a given social group or social class language, beliefs, ideas, aesthetic tastes, knowledge, skills and usages of many

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kinds are handed on ('tradition' means 'handing on') from person to person and from one generation to another" (cited in *ibidem*: 92). We notice, thus, a shift, as definitions start emphasising social heritage, and even tradition¹, as an inherent element of culture and this because tradition is deeply rooted in cultural patterns and symbols shared by people. One pertinent point to mention here is that this development owes much to the work of Franz Boas² and his students, whom saw the need to challenge the existing evolutionary schemes and resist the "tendency to taxonomize cultures" (Bennett et al, 2005: 68).

We cannot forget, however, that Herder, a visionary, had already shown the same concern in his unfinished *Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind*, in the eighteenth century, when he claimed that "[t]he very thought of a superior European culture is a blatant insult to the majesty of Nature" (cited in Williams, 1976: 79). What is more, he was the first "to speak of 'cultures' in the plural: the specific and variable cultures of social and economic groups within a nation" (*ibidem*), which contradicts the statement by Menand, presented in Bennett et al (2005: 67), that it was Boas. In fact, what happened was that such innovation received little or almost no attention in that century, or in the following, being credited just in the twentieth century to Boas's disciples.

Actually, in the twentieth century, these anthropologists came to realise that such schemes were too speculative, valuing Europeans as superior to peoples from other parts of the world and, therefore, after some experimental studies, they presented a position known as historical particularism, that is, Boasians claimed that each culture was the result of distinct historical events and circumstances and not merely the product of environment or race. This led inevitably to the notion of cultural relativism, which assumed that each society could be judged only in its own terms, since there were no higher or lower forms of culture as there were no universal standards³.

This cultural relativism of Boas was further evidenced in the late twenties and thirties by a growing interrelation between anthropology and psychology, which emerged after Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead's propagation of culture and personality theories. According to these followers of Boas, culture should be regarded as a set of rules governing behaviour, which, in turn, create shared traits and customs among people⁴. Those common traits and experiences, on one hand, and the fear of the unknown, on the other, have led most of the times to nationalism and to an ethnocentric/eurocentred vision of the world that must be banned, as Benedict remarks:

The study of different cultures has another important bearing upon present-day thought and behaviour. Modern existence has thrown many civilizations into close contact, and at the moment the overwhelming response to this situation is nationalism and racial snobbery. There has never been time when civilization stood more in need of individuals who are genuinely culture-conscious, who can see objectively the socially conditioned behaviour of other peoples without fear and recrimination.

Contempt for the alien is not the only possible solution of our present contact of races and nationalities. It is not even a scientifically founded solution.

(1959: 10-11)

And she goes on to explore the idea of cultural relativism, strongly opposing racist assumptions about the natural inferiority of non-white people. From her point of view, our histories of colonialism and imperialism have contributed to our racist perceptions of others and their consequent subjugation, something which must be

¹ These two terms – heritage and tradition – will be discussed further on in this article.

² This German-born anthropologist was averse to racism and, due to an egalitarian liberal intellectual background, he tried to formulate an alternative conception of anthropology and managed to do that through an empirical fieldwork among American Indians and Eskimos.

³ For further reading, cf. "Mary Kingsley and the emergence of cultural relativism" (chapter 2) in Rich, Paul. (1986). *Race and Empire in British Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 27-49.

⁴ This conceptualisation of culture as behaviour, and particularly the quest for dominant personality types and themes within a society, led to national character studies.

deconstructed. As a result, endowed with a didactic voice, Ruth Benedict urges us to open our minds to an anti-racist struggle against our colonial, imperial, paternalist and liberal notions of race:

We have travelled, we pride ourselves on our sophistication. But we have failed to understand the relativity of cultural habits, and we remain debarred from much profit and enjoyment in our human relations with peoples of different standards, and untrustworthy in our dealings with them.

The recognition of the cultural basis of race prejudice is a desperate need in present Western civilization.

(ibidem: 11)

The notion that race is socially constructed has become commonplace. We all know that racial divisions are a result of arbitrarily assigned categories which have no real, genetic or biological basis. Instead, the word race is inexorably linked to politics and it is an ambivalent term as it depends on the social milieu and on the historical context of the body politic. Even so, across time, many people have justified their biased behaviour and practices with phenotypical arguments, as Miles and Torres (1996: 27) point out:

This language of “race” was usually anchored in the signification of certain forms of somatic difference (skin colour, facial characteristics, body shape and size, eye colour, skull shape) which were interpreted as the physical marks which accompanied, and which in some unexplained way determined, the nature of those so marked.

Nonetheless, in a constantly changing world, where the relocation of borders, immigration and multiculturalism are a reality, there is, more than ever, a need **to embrace difference** and adopt the anti-racist slogan which “has been employed as a counter-weight to ideas of racial divisions within humankind”: “there is only one race – the human race” (Murji in Bennett et al, 2005: 291).

It should be noted that Benedict’s efforts to describe complex societies on the basis of configuration later revealed to be unsuccessful and too simplistic, as Kroeber and Kluckhohn argue, because those observable and empirical characteristics were idiosyncratic.

Whether behavior is to be included in culture remains a matter of dispute. The behavior in question is of course the concrete behavior of individual human beings, not any collective abstraction. The two present authors incline strongly to exclude behavior as such from culture. (...) First, there also is human behavior not determined by culture, so that behavior as such cannot be used as a differentiating criterion of culture. Second, culture being basically a form or pattern or design or way, it is an abstraction from concrete human behavior, but is not itself behaviour.

(1952: 305)

As we have seen, the period from the 1920s up to the 1950s was very prolific for anthropological research. Given that, and in an attempt to give a structured overview of the notion of culture, the two U.S. anthropologists cited above, A. L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, compiled 164 definitions in their monograph *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions* (1952), where they illustrated the development of the term with an emphasis on descriptive, historical, normative, psychological, structural and genetic perspectives.

From the 60s onwards, there was the emergence of the view of cultures as texts, that is, as an interpretative polyphony requiring a negotiation of meanings. More explicitly, culture was then defined as a composite of multiple realities that could not be described from a concrete, unitary perspective:

[C]ulture is inevitably an abstraction. (...) Culture is a design or system of designs for living; it is a plan, not the living itself; it is that which selectively channels men’s

reactions; it is not the reactions themselves. The importance of this is that it extricates culture as such from behavior, abstracts it from human activity; the concept is itself selective.

(1952: 120)

The view expressed above has been strongly reiterated by current research, thus being considered as postmodern. Culture has indeed been regarded as a conceptual vehicle through which the collective shows itself. Given that, this notion works symbolically, as it is based on interpretative positions that value a collective imaginary for the group, constructing its experiences and a conception of identity in a particular way. This relationship between culture and value is grounded in Max Weber's sociological claim that "[t]he concept of culture is a *value-concept*" (1949: 76). He points out that "[e]mpirical reality becomes 'culture' to us because and insofar as we relate it to value ideas. It includes those segments and only those segments of reality which have become significant to us because of this value relevance" (ibidem).

It is an undeniable fact that we value some "segments", using Weber's words, and that inevitably implies issues of particularity and distinction, of unity and diversity. For example, there are certain traits that mark off one group from another and that evaluative and most times hierarchical connotations of the term culture contribute to emphasise differences while looking at and interacting with the Other. However, we must be aware of the fact that otherness does not exist as a brute fact, but it is rather a representation of the group itself.

This value theory is also intimately related to the binary between high culture and low, mass or popular culture, which gained weight earlier, during the industrial revolution, due to separations that had class, ethnic and gender biases. The society's elites considered high culture to be aesthetic and intellectual accomplishments, such as artistic objects, grounded on the quality of durability, as Arendt (1961: 209) makes clear:

From the standpoint of sheer durability, art works clearly are superior to all other things; since they stay longer in the world than anything else, they are the worldliest of all things. Moreover, they are the only things without any function in the life process of society; strictly speaking they are fabricated not for men, but for the world which is meant to outlast the life-span of mortals, the coming and going of the generations. Not only are they not consumed like consumer goods and not used up like use objects; they are deliberately removed from the processes of consumption and usage and isolated against the sphere of human life necessities. This removal can be achieved in a great variety of ways; and only where it is being done does culture, in the specific sense, come into being.

In other words, those objects worth of value and preservation by collective decision are the ones that will last through the centuries and are likely to be taken as emblems of identity. Contrary to mundane objects, they resist consumerism, thus being granted cultural status.

On the other hand, Arendt addresses low, mass or popular culture contemptuously, metaphorically characterizing it as gluttonous: "Mass culture comes into being when mass society seizes upon cultural objects, and its danger is that the life process of society (...) will literally consume the cultural objects, eat them up and destroy them" (ibidem: 207).

In the twentieth century, following the advent of industrial capitalism, much of what was previously known as high culture became widely available to the public. According to Clifford (1988: 234), from the twentieth century onwards there has been a growing concern about the democratisation of the culture concept, mainly due to the work – interpretation – of ethnographers:

Art and culture emerged after 1800 as mutually reinforcing domains of human *value*, strategies for gathering, marking off, protecting the best and most interesting creations of “Man”. In the twentieth century the categories underwent a series of further developments. The plural, anthropological definition of culture (...) emerged as a liberal alternative to racist classifications of human diversity. It was a sensitive means for understanding different and dispersed “whole ways of life” in a high colonial context of unprecedented global interconnection. *Culture* in its full evolutionary richness and authenticity, formerly reserved for the best creations of modern Europe, could now be extended to all the world’s populations.

As we have seen, the concept of culture has been criticised from a number of different perspectives and suffered numerous shifts. Therefore, we must be very cautious when adopting a single definition amidst the myriad of available ones. What is true, on the whole, is that culture defines who we are; how we, as groups and individuals, think, express our values, behave and communicate. But if culture is necessary for maintaining a degree of continuity within a community, we cannot obliterate the fact that it also means constant interaction with external forces, turning it into an ever-evolving process.

If culture is continually evolving, how is, then, a sense of tradition and heritage so ingrained in cultural patterns and symbols often shared by generations of people? What is heritage and how can one distinguish it from tradition?

Culture has been referred to as man’s “social heritage” and as “the man-made part of the environment. It consists essentially of any form of behavior which is acquired through learning, and which is patterned in conformity with certain approved norms. Under it anthropologists include all the customs, traditions, and institutions of a people, together with their products and techniques of production. A folktale or a proverb is thus clearly a part of culture.

(Bascom, 1965: 27)

Heritage has always been perceived as the remains – material or immaterial – of past human activity or, as Michael L. Blakey puts it, as the product of kinship and tradition: “One’s own social past or background, familial, ethnic, and national, constitutes much of who we think we are (...). Like lineage, heritage conveys relationships through kinship and tradition” (cited in Gathercole and Lowenthal, 1990: 38).

This notion of something that is shared within the community exists since the thirteenth century, as, by that time, it was used to designate “‘inheritance’ or ‘heirloom’”, that is, “the property or land passed through the generations, and acquired by sons (usually) on the death of their father” (Schwarz in Bennett, 2005: 154). Besides this profane sense, the term also included a spiritual one, which was connected to the idea of God’s Chosen People, from whom the Messiah, the redeemer of the human race, shall come. Gradually, the term became broader and more inclusive, today coming to signify everything that conveys cultural significance from group member to group member.

Heritage, thus, depends on the concept of tradition, to such an extent that these terms “often came to be interchangeable or synonymous” (ibidem: 154). However, according to Kroeber and Kluckhohn, there is a very clear conceptual distinction based on the aesthetics of reception:

“Heritage” connotes rather what is received, the product; “tradition” refers primarily to the process by which receipt takes place, but also to what is given and accepted. Both terms view culture statically, or at least as more or less fixed, though the word “tradition” denotes dynamic activity as well as end product.

(1952: 93)

The dynamic feature inherent to the word tradition is justified by its etymological root: this English term, coming from the Latin root word *tradere*, has its origin in the fourteenth century, and it meant to hand over or deliver. We cannot forget that this act of passing something on is, using Williams' words, an "abstract and exhortatory" activity, implying selection based on respect and duty: "**Tradition** survives in English as a description of a general process of handing down, but there is a very strong and often predominant sense of this entailing respect and duty. (...) [O]nly some of them [of traditions] or parts of them have been selected for our respect and duty..." (1983: 319).

What are the criteria used by groups for choosing and passing down certain objects, heroes, events and oral *realia* from their cultural past? Is it accurate to always associate tradition with the past? How long does it take to turn something into a tradition? These questions have no easy answers. Williams tells us that "[i]t is sometimes observed (...) that it only takes two generations to make anything **traditional**..." (ibidem). However, it is not consensual, because Sims and Stephens, paraphrasing Toelken, claim that "time may be a matter of 'years' or of 'moments'" (2005: 66) and they even "acknowledge that traditions do not always come to us from generations past" (ibidem: 65). But don't they?

The sharing of traditions is more than a "linear and chronological" activity; it is connected to Clifford Geertz's idea of culture as a web: "[v]isualizing culture as a web, and tradition as something that is actively transmitted and circulated across that web, helps us to see that the past is only one part of a very fluid, complex process (ibidem: 69).

In fact, and contrary to common belief, tradition does not simply rely on the past, but rather uses it or some of its elements to illuminate the present and create/maintain one's sense of group identity. Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952: 307) explain that "[h]eritage and tradition, it is true, do involve the past; but their focus is on the reception by the present, not on the perduring influence of the past as such". We may use knowledge gained from past generations, but we may as well form and adapt tradition from our contemporaneous peers in order to suit our current interests.

Williams's theory about a selective tradition makes possible a comprehensive understanding of such a complex phenomenon as oral heritage (the product). Taking a story as an example, one could ask the reason why it may be presented in a number of different versions, not only throughout the world but also within a given country or community. The keywords are memory, selection, continuation, repetition and invention.

The act of storytelling is an art of memory which mediates between continuity in repetition and variation resulting from invention. Sims and Stephens elaborate on this by stating that "[r]epetition is important in establishing continuity, since a group repeats something because it matters to the group; if it isn't meaningful, it won't be repeated, and if it isn't repeated, it won't become a tradition" (2005: 66). But this continuity does not necessarily mean accuracy and authenticity, because creativity, instead of duplication, may take place. Paraphrasing Hobsbawm and Ranger, Schwarz writes that "tradition [is] increasingly subject to invention in the present" (2005: 154), which, in other words, is the same as saying that authenticity is itself constructed so that "tradition and heritage represent a means for those in the present to organize the (historical) past" (ibidem), as previously noted. Bascom (1965: 29), a titan of anthropology and folklore⁵, perfectly describes the way that the whole process takes place:

⁵ Folklore is another word which deserves consideration while focusing on tradition, because the latter is the basis of the former. It was coined in 1846 by William Thoms, a British antiquarian, but it "is perhaps as old as mankind" (Handoo, 1989: 1). According to Alan Dundes, "[f]olklore includes myths, legends, folktales, jokes, proverbs, riddles, chants, charms, blessings, curses, oaths, insults, retorts, taunts, teases, toasts, tongue-twisters, and greeting and leave-taking formulas (...). It also includes folk costume, folk dance, folk drama (and mime), folk art, folk belief (or superstition), folk medicine, folk instrumental music (...), folksongs (...), folk speech (...), folk similes (...), folk metaphors (...), and names (...). Folk poetry ranges from oral epics to autograph-book verse, epitaphs, latrinalia (...), and nursery rhymes. The list of folklore forms also contains games;

The development of an item of folklore (...) must have been invented at some time, by some individual. It can be assumed that many folktales or proverbs, like many other inventions, were rejected because they either did not fill a recognized or subconscious need, or because they were incompatible with the accepted patterns and traditions of folklore or of culture as a whole. If they were accepted, they depended on retelling, in the same way that all cultural traits in a nonliterate society depend upon restatement and re-enactment. (...) In the course of this retelling or redoing, change occurs each time new variations are introduced, and again these innovations are subject to acceptance or rejection. As this process continues, each new invention is adapted gradually to the needs of the society and to the pre-existing culture patterns, which may themselves be modified somewhat to conform to the new invention.

But it has not always been that way. There were times when tradition was understood as a “‘sanctified’ text, merely moved along by a particular person”, usually known as the “tradition bearer”, a concept which stood in opposition to the idea of tradition makers (Sims and Stephens, 2005: 70), and he/she might “be an elder or a person especially experienced in a particular type of performance” (ibidem: 71).

The nineteenth-century romantics, for example, were attracted to folklore collecting and advocated that tradition bearers were merely the reproducers of texts, not their active users. They were regarded as uncreative tellers of oral forms, because the emphasis at the time was on pure transmission of lore. According to Lord Raglan (1936: 130), “[n]o popular storyteller has ever been known to invent anything” and when they do “make minor changes, [it is] mostly for the worse”. It was believed that there was no virtue in originality and, therefore, there had to be great concern about the truth and the performer’s oratory skills to preserve one’s heritage.

Later, by the mid-twentieth century, there was a growing recognition that telling a tale meant more than just reciting a memorised text; it implied creatively improvising while using oral formulae and structural patterns. This did not mean completely free creation, as Vladimir Propp, a Russian scholar, argues: “It can be established that the creator of a tale rarely invents; he receives his material from his surroundings or from current realities and adapts them to a tale” (1968: 4). Destroying the obligatory norms and exercising one’s creative powers through traditions was, then, a difficult and challenging process, because, as we have seen, the idea that tellers were slaves to tradition was taken very seriously. Von Sydow (1965: 219), “[o]ne of the greatest theoreticians in the history of folkloristics”, in distinguishing between active and passive bearers of tradition, synthesises the whole mechanics of folklore transmission:

Active bearers of tradition are those individuals who tell the tales and sing the songs. They may be contrasted with passive bearers (...) who merely listen to the performances of active bearers. (...) If an active bearer migrates from a place before imparting his materials, the folklore may die out in that place. If in the new place (...) the active bearer fails to continue his active role, the folklore may not survive. (...) [I]t is possible for passive bearers to become active bearers in the event of the death or departure of an active bearer in a community. But in any event (...) the number of active bearers is relatively small and (...) the transmission of folklore is carried out in irregular leaps and

gestures; symbols; prayers (...); practical jokes; folk etymologies; food recipes; quilt and embroidery designs; house, barn and fence types; street vendor’s cries; and even the traditional conventional sounds used to summon animals or to give them commands. There are such minor forms as mnemonic devices (...), envelope sealers (...), and the traditional comments made after body emissions (...). There are such major forms as festivals and special day (or holiday) customs (...)” (1965: 3). Given the large amount of forms and definitions that the term folklore comprises, it is not surprising that it has often been misunderstood and misapplied. Generally speaking, and according to a simpler approach, “[f]olklore is the material that is handed on by tradition, either by word of mouth or by custom and practice” (Taylor, 1965: 34) and that plays a vital role within a society, because it ensures conformity to the accepted cultural norms.

bounds, rather than by means of smooth regular wave in the form of a concentric circle diffusing outward from a center point of origin.

From all that has been said, it is clear that oral heritage is a multi-dimensional phenomenon that has so many different layers of meaning to so many different people that it becomes hard to theorise or make generalisations. What is for sure is that oral heritage helps us build collective knowledge and obtain our personal identity, our sense of community and ancestral anchorage. It is the product of oral tradition and this, in turn, “is inclusive; it is the actions, behavior, relationships, practices throughout the whole social, economic, and spiritual life process of people”, as Ortiz claims (1992: 7). Oral heritage supports the idea of we-ness, as it is a fundamental part of our culture. Stories are just a small sample of such a large scale phenomenon, but still a very good source for analysis.

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