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What is Australian Indigenous Oral History?

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Submitted Abstract:

The concept of Australian Indigenous oral history has been variously defined and maligned; used and abused. Terminological tensions abound and we ask if the current multitude of definitions are all referring to the same thing, or if there are subtle differences? For many the notion of Indigenous Oral history is unnecessarily narrow, confined to Dreamtime stories, creation histories, myth and legends, etc. In this paper we investigate definitional and terminological aspects of Australian Indigenous Oral History and relate these to questions of methodology. We hope to broaden existing definitions and argue for an encompassing definition, which extends to the transmission of knowledge orally, through to the recordings of Indigenous knowledge (writing, audio or video, and pictorially). Such a process should take us beyond the limitations of academic language and western epistemological frameworks and ensure a better understanding of (and concomitant respect for) the nuances, subtleties and complexities of Australian Indigenous Oral History.

Introduction

Offering definitions of “Indigenous Oral History” that are both clear and concise is problematic. The connotations and denotations are fraught with ambiguity, ambivalence, erroneous misunderstandings and (especially in ideological terms) controversy. Historical factors underpin this complexity, and colonial power structures have ensured that both terms and concepts have been vague and fluid in response to historical specificity, intellectual-fashion and even the political correctness of the period. There remains a terminological minefield through which to tip toe when seeking an understanding of the term(s) surrounding “Indigenous Oral History”.

Perhaps this is because “Indigenous Oral History” is not the correct term, or perhaps the term is so laden with excess cultural baggage that it has lost its resonance and meaning. Conceptually and terminologically “Indigenous Oral History” has been used as a shortened designation of various aspects of Indigenous knowledge and memory; and the transmission of this from one generation to the next. The emphasis placed on ‘traditional’ Aboriginal Australia as *non-literate* has meant that there tends to be a value judgment attached to the term within colonialist discourse.

Within this paper we would like to ask “What is Australian Aboriginal Oral History” and provide an explanation based on the primary research we are separately and collaboratively involved with; and consider some of the methodologies used within these research parameters. Beyond the limitations of this discussion, though of enormous importance and continuing research, is the question of how the dominant colonialist society has dealt with Indigenous people’s own conceptualisation of their knowledge.

Australian Aboriginal Oral History

The three aspects of Australian Aboriginal Oral History outlined here – oral tradition, oral history and oral records – have been drawn from the ways in which the Aboriginal community makes use of the various aspects of “Aboriginal Oral History” in their endeavours to share and reclaim Aboriginal knowledge¹.

¹ The three aspects of Australian Indigenous Oral History has been drawn together by Shannon Faulkhead from literature and the Koorie community for her thesis in progress: Faulkhead, S. ([2007]). Narrative Creation and Koorie Victoria [in progress, due for submission 2007]. CAIS - Arts. Melbourne, Monash University. PhD.

Aboriginal oral tradition is the process of passing on knowledge from one generation to the next orally through the spoken word, music, dance, performance, and art. This involves interpretation, reinterpretation and analysis of the past to ensure cultural survival into the present. This process prevents the knowledge from becoming just stories seen by younger community members as irrelevant to their present circumstances. The sharing of knowledge orally from one person to another, or others, is a process of intimacy and physical connection that involves animation, emotion², sympathy and empathy, and requires and exudes vibrancy that written records can rarely achieve. Whilst all cultures have a form of oral tradition, the term tends to be associated with Indigenous peoples who, at the point of colonial invasion, did not have a recognised form of text and most knowledge was orally transmitted. In this way it can be seen that there is a multilayered and ongoing tension between the past and the present, which is played out within this field of research.

Aboriginal scholar Wayne Atkinson was one of the first authors to sub-divide “Aboriginal Oral History” into its constituent elements, when he defined oral tradition as a ‘traditional way of passing on information before the pen and paper was introduced’³ We wish to argue, along similar lines to Cashman⁴, that oral tradition still occurs and is preferred within many Aboriginal communities throughout Australia. *The Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia*, however, suggests that there is:

a difference between traditional and modern stories. Traditional stories are about the human place in the world, relations between the environment and the many possibilities in life in human relations; modern stories, whilst addressing similar issues, are overlaid with an extra dimension – that of politics – in order to make them pertinent to the contemporary era.⁵

Contemporary Australian Indigenous people are a fully modern, globally

² Hamilton, P. (1994). *The Knife Edge: Debates about Memory*. Memory and history in twentieth-century Australia. K. Darian-Smith and P. Hamilton. Melbourne, Oxford University Press: viii, 255 p.

³ Atkinson, W. (1984). Oral History and Cultural Heritage. Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Seminar, Aborigines Advancement League, Unpublished.

⁴ Cashman, G. (2002). [Koorie oral history and health]. Medicine. Melbourne, University of Melbourne. Graduate Diploma in Health and Medicine.

⁵ Horton, D. and Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. (1994). The Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, society and culture. Canberra, Aboriginal Studies Press for the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.

connected and often integrated groups who are committed to accessing the same advances and developments available to the rest of Australia. From the perspective of knowledge production and transmission Indigenous people are using the same technological developments that have enabled other communities to record, store and transmit knowledge, be it historical, visual, aural and so on.

Relatively cheap and easily accessible recording technology developed in the 1940s⁶ provided a method, other than textual recording or writing, where the accounts of people who participated in past events could be recorded for the purposes of research and developing accessible archives⁷. Thus the discipline of Oral History literally developed alongside the recording technology and became the key mechanism for recording knowledge/ information that is absent from the written records of any given community – more specifically, to include knowledge from dispossessed, disempowered or disadvantaged groups, who would rarely be in a position to write about their experiences⁸; as such oral history emerged as a ‘means of resisting the dominant versions of the past’;⁹ it is regarded as ‘a unique opportunity to hear people's memories about their past and its impact on their present.’¹⁰

Oral history was viewed as an opportunity for Aboriginal communities to have their historical records and knowledge heard. Oral history undertaken by even the most sympathetic and dedicated researcher can still fall into the trap incommensurability. As Cashman notes these are the problems of ‘an outsider looking in to another's culture attempting to define what the beliefs of that culture are.’¹¹ Understanding and analysing the collected material can lead to the inadvertent but nonetheless detrimental re-interpretation of the Aboriginal knowledge under discussion. Oral histories collected by non-Aboriginal researchers for a predominantly non-Indigenous audience are collected for specific purposes and ‘[i]nvariably, even a

⁶ Oral History Association [USA] Oral History Association, Dickinson College. 2004: Website: <http://www.dickinson.edu/organizations/oha/>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Hamilton, A. (1994). *Skeletons of Empire: Australians and the Burma-Thailand Railway*. *Memory and history in twentieth-century Australia*. K. Darian-Smith and P. Hamilton. Melbourne, Oxford University Press: viii, 255 p.

⁹ Hamilton, P. (1990). "Inventing the self: oral history as autobiography." *Hecate* 16(1/2): 128-133.

¹⁰ Mallinson, S., J. Popay, et al. (2003). "Historical Data for Health Inequalities Research: A Research Note." *Sociology* 37(4): 771-780.

¹¹ Cashman, G. (2002). [Koorie oral history and health]. *Medicine*. Melbourne, University of Melbourne. Graduate Diploma in Health and Medicine.

careful listener can easily impose a meaning which makes sense in the cultural terms of the outsider rather than the storyteller'.¹² One of the abiding tensions extant in this type of research was the sense felt by Aboriginal communities that they lacked control over the re-interpretation and (re)presentation of their histories. Oral history is not merely intended to supplement the written word it has an immediacy and veracity of its own. What emerged from non-Indigenous recordings of oral history was not the knowledge and tradition that the community(s) felt had been shared but new 'whitefella' knowledge which was in turn both different to Aboriginal knowledge and on occasions simply incorrect. As a result Aboriginal communities wanted to share their knowledge on their terms. Therefore what we are calling *Aboriginal Oral Records* emerged.

"Aboriginal Oral Records"¹³ is a method of decolonisation¹⁴ where cultural control is maintained by the knowledge holder(s). This maintenance is implicit in the process of recording, access and storage of their knowledge. These records can be written, audio/video taped, digitally multi-media – any of the many formats of knowledge transmission and storage available today. Initially "Aboriginal Oral Records" were produced out of fear that knowledge was being lost due to the passing on of Aboriginal Elders before they had the opportunity to share their knowledge.¹⁵ Now oral records are being produced for various reasons such as: sharing and educating the Aboriginal, general Australian and international communities; storage of information for future generations that is feared to be lost; personal stories for family members; and painful stories that the knowledge holder does not want shared

¹² Cruikshank, J. (1990). Myth as a framework for life stories: Athapaskan women making sense of social change in northern Canada. *The Myths we live by*. R. Samuel and P. Thompson. London; New York, Routledge: 174-183.

¹³ According to Cashman, G. (2002): 'Slim and Thompson distinguish three forms of oral testimony: oral history; oral tradition, including artistry; and, life stories. The term "oral history" is commonly used to encompass all of the above descriptions of what is essentially a process of recording the "living memory of the past".' (p. 11). Life Stories does not encompass the diversity of the knowledge and stories held and shared by the Indigenous community which led to the adoption of the term "Indigenous Oral Records" for Faulkhead, S. ([2007]).

¹⁴ For further information on oral history as a method of decolonisation in health research see Vickery, J. (2004). Decolonizing Oral History as Health Research. *Public Health*. Geelong, Deakin University., and

Vickery, J., S. Faulkhead, et al. (2004). *Indigenous Insights into Oral History, Social Determinants, and Decolonisation*. Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health Workshop, Adelaide.

¹⁵ Atkinson, W. (1984). *Oral History and Cultural Heritage*. Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Seminar, Aborigines Advancement League, Unpublished.

until after their death.

The inclusion of oral tradition, oral history and oral records as aspects of “Australian Aboriginal Oral History” could be viewed as a misnomer. However, it can also be viewed as a historical development of the transmission of Australian Aboriginal knowledge¹⁶, and the reclamation of the control and ownership of Aboriginal knowledge. Currently our thinking is that the term “Oral Memory” is more encompassing than “Oral History”.

Methodologies

In the following section we would like to ask, reflecting on the concerns raised above, how do these areas of Aboriginal oral history work when used in a research context?

Oral tradition is a method of learning, but this learning is as a participant not as an observer or recorder. This knowledge is to be shared from one to another, and the time, place and spirit of the process are all part of it. Oral tradition is knowledge shared orally – any attempt to change this format means that it is no longer oral tradition. Researchers who take time to experience this fully may develop a more comprehensive understanding of the culture they are researching and will provide a stronger connection to community, however it is not meant as a method of ‘research’ that leads to literature. It is important that oral tradition continues as there are stories that are not meant to be published:

Not all authors are happy with the thought of Aboriginal tradition being preserved in books. Context and assumed knowledge are prerequisites for understanding traditional and oral knowledge. The sacredness of the land is fundamental to the Aboriginal worldview, and is therefore essential for understanding an Aboriginal story. It is also an integral ingredient in the interpretative strategies Aboriginal people bring to the stories they hear. To isolate the story from its very roots in the land is to destroy it and change its very nature. The story cannot be told without the land, nor can the audience have a true level of comprehension apart from the land. The land is essential in the telling, production and hearing of a traditional Aboriginal story. It is a sense of place that gives central importance to land in the Aboriginal world.¹⁷

¹⁶ Anderson, S. (2002). "Australian Indigenous Oral History Today: What's the story?" *Crossings* 7(1).

¹⁷ Horton, D. and Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. (1994). *The Encyclopaedia*

Initially the Aboriginal community did not use oral history research methods – oral history methods were used to research the Aboriginal community in order to write about Aboriginal people, for a predominantly non-Aboriginal audience. The Aboriginal community was treated as research objects or as the last remnants of a dying race – either physically and/or culturally.

We would like to believe that this is occurring less today, with many fields, including oral history, medicine and archaeology, endorsing and embracing the concept of Aboriginal ownership of their knowledge, and researchers following procedures and protocols that endorse the notion of shared research projects. These projects are a meld of oral tradition and oral history where the knowledge holder and the interviewer agree on the direction of the interview. This differs to oral tradition and oral records where the knowledge holder has complete control of the direction, or oral history where the interviewer has complete control.

However, some difficulties remain and there continues to be a desire to overemphasize the importance of the written word, particularly within the research community. We suggest that this is related to what we are calling ‘irreconcilable ontologies’¹⁸. This is the impossibility of reducing Western and Aboriginal knowledge systems so that they are equivalent or equitable¹⁹. Oral records are still very much Aboriginal people telling their narratives their way. It is a useful method for Aboriginal researchers, however not as beneficial to non-Indigenous researchers. In fact it could be offensive for non-Indigenous researchers to reinterpret these records – especially without Aboriginal involvement.

The Aboriginal community, their hopes and desires should always come first. Any terminology should be discussed with the particular communities that are partners in the project prior to being used in public documents. This includes what terms they would like used and what those terms mean to them. The terminology listed here is just one view – another community may prefer other terms.

of Aboriginal Australia: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, society and culture. Canberra, Aboriginal Studies Press for the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.

¹⁸ Russell, L. (2005). Indigenous knowledge and archives: accessing hidden history and understandings. Australian Indigenous Knowledge and Libraries. M. Nakata and M. Langton. Kingston, ACT, Australian Academic and Research Libraries (AARL). 36:2.

¹⁹ See Attwood, B. (2001). ‘Learning about the truth’: the stolen generations narrative. Telling stories: indigenous history and memory in Australia and New Zealand. B. Attwood and F. Magowan. Crows Nest, N.S.W., Allen & Unwin: 183-212.

Conclusion

Over the course of our research we have encountered numerous definitions and terminological entanglements with respect to ‘Aboriginal Oral History’. Rather than attempt a uniform one size fits all set of definitions we suggest that project specific terms be developed in consultation with knowledge owners. In the collaborative project *Trust and Technology: Building archival systems for Indigenous oral memory* we have attempted to, in a practical and academically rigorous manner, explore some of these terminological problems. Over the course of over 100 interviews with Aboriginal people in Victoria we have revealed (not surprisingly) that the importance of oral traditions continues to underwrite Victorian Aboriginal culture. In order to not privilege the western discipline of history and the ontological perambulations of western historical knowledge we have adopted the term ‘oral memory’ to stand as a short-hand reference to Aboriginal historical knowledge that has been transmitted orally from generation to generation. Emerging out of these interviews has been the view that storytelling and narrative development, even narrative accrual is considered fundamental to Indigenous identity (both personal and group), and is regarded as absolutely essential for cultural continuity and survival.

The oral memory of the Victorian Aboriginal community is regarded as part and parcel of knowing themselves. Interviewees reflect on knowing where people are from (place), when (time), and who they are related to (kin) to sustain core social relationships. Oral memory and the stories that are constructed out of this are about knowing each other, and each other’s stories.

Perhaps one of the most interesting observations concerns the gender of storytellers, or those willing to talk about story telling, revealing that Aboriginal women are pivotal in sustaining culture. As the external authoritarian threats such as that represented by the ‘stolen generations’ have diminished there has emerged within the Aboriginal community a desire to tell their stories more widely. Since the 1960s a nationwide revival of shared identity, pride, and yearning to know has paralleled the growth of Aboriginal oral tradition, oral history and oral records and that which we are collectively calling oral memory.

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