

# ORAL TRADITION: The Lakota Way of Remembering

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Oral traditions are typically discussed in reference to antiquity. Famous epic poetry such as Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, most often read at the high school level, started out as stories to be spoken aloud at gatherings, sometimes accompanied by an instrument if the story was sung. Today, we read these poems as texts, often forgetting their oral origins. Europe's transition to written documentation and storytelling over the course of centuries has created a global definition of what it means to be "literate" and "educated." Oral traditions became a thing of the past, and any culture that practiced oral history was viewed as "inferior" and "barbaric." These sentiments were carried with the British as they colonized the North American continent. Now, it's time to validate Indigenous oral tradition, acknowledge its significance in the greater human story, and consider integrating it into current aspects of society for the betterment of future generations and the Native American community.

The Lakota tribe of the Oceti Sakowin (People of the Seven Council Fires, or The Sioux Nation) have primarily inhabited areas of what we now call North and South Dakota. For many generations, the Lakota have kept their history alive through oral tradition (as have many other Native American tribes). Vast amounts of knowledge about the Dakotas and their nature have been passed down by the Lakota, consisting of topics such as

science and natural medicine. However, early colonists rejected this knowledge because of their established ideas of what it meant to be “educated,” ideas that did not coincide with the Indigenous culture’s definition of “educated.” In his publication, “‘They Talk, We Listen’: Indigenous Knowledges and Western Discourse,” Hartmut Lutz (a German-born Native American Studies scholar) suggests many reasons for European dismissal of Indigenous teachings; and, unsurprisingly, the notion of “literacy” plays a substantial part. He writes that “Indigenous researchers I read all privilege story over formula, experiences over abstract learning, and orality over literacy. These are procedures which our Western academia has a hard time recognizing, accommodating or validating, let alone accepting” (Lutz 73-74). There seems to be a rejection of Native American knowledge by the West because the core motivations and approaches to historical documentation are very different. Europeans uphold text as well as the compilation and far-spreading of knowledge, retaining an impartial approach to information all the while. Native Americans are concerned with the connection of one’s self to everything around, all people and all nature—in this version of documentation, the individual orating history cannot be separated from the historical facts presented. An Indigenous mindset could alter the way we approach history, starting with becoming more personal with its source and valuing the voices that have been neglected.

A beautiful theme of interconnectedness thrives in Indigenous culture but appears strange and foreign to Westerners. So ultimately, there is a refusal of Native American teachings and doubt as to whether they can even be relied upon as accurate in any way. Warren Cariou, a Canadian researcher of Indigenous culture, touches on this idea of ignoring Indigenous oral tradition in his findings as well. A primary reason he suggests Western distaste for Indigenous oral performance is its resistance to commodification (Cariou 315). It is not bought or sold but shared freely with all

members of the community. It is a gift to be given and received. This preservation of Indigenous storytelling is contrary to the capitalist mindset of colonial America and to the Western transferal of knowledge via (purchasable) text.

By rejecting Lakota and other tribal teachings, the early Europeans closed themselves off to a wealth of science—it just wasn't a kind of science the colonizers were used to. Because the method of documentation is different (orally passed down instead of written), the Lakota scientific details within the story of Washun Niya (or Wind Cave) in South Dakota, for example, have been largely ignored. Sina Bear Eagle, a member of the Oglala Lakota Nation, tells the origins of the Lakota people as told to her by Wimer Mesteth: “This story begins at a time when the plants and animals were still being brought into existence, but there were no people or bison living on the earth” (Eagle 35). From the very beginning, there is a recognizable truth to this tale, one that European scientists only began to discover sometime in the 1700s. According to geological time and the theory of evolution, plants and several animal species were living long before the introduction of mammals such as bison and homo-sapiens (Geggel). The rest of the Lakota story consists of humans emerging from a cave, a powerful double-faced woman, and a Creator figure—all aspects that cause Westerners to quickly write off the entire story as ridiculous. But is it not possible for a people to remember exactly where they came from, especially if they had made a practice of oral tradition early on? To write off the Lakota oration as a mere myth seems extremely short-sighted and deprives academic circles of new (well, actually very old) thinking.

Lyla June Johnston, an Indigenous public speaker and scholar, co-wrote a short video titled “The Possibilities of Regeneration” to present Indigenous solutions to environmental problems, solutions that the original people of North America have been practicing for centuries. She goes into depth on the method of how “Indigenous

nations maintained grasslands for buffalo habitat by bringing gentle fire to the land. For thousands of years, following the Grass Burning Moon, nutrient-rich ash became a sacred offering to the earth” (The Possibilities of Regeneration 1:07). There isn’t an introductory Environmental Science class that doesn’t teach this concept of a “controlled burn” which is when a man-made fire is started to spur regrowth. Old plant life outcompetes newer growth, and so the young vegetation and any other species that weren’t able to compete are allowed room to grow after the burning. Johnston says that “Over time, this generated topsoils up to four feet deep, creating grasslands for buffalo and other herbivores. Almost every corner of this continent was nourished by the medicine of human fire” (“The Possibilities of Regeneration,” 1:24). The first usage of controlled burning within National Parks in the 1970s is often discussed, but not its Indigenous origins. Again, Native science has been ignored and Western science has taken an unnecessary amount of time to catch up. It’s essential that the Indigenous perspective of science be shared—their community is entitled to the credit of scientific ideas that the West has “discovered.”

Fortunately, as we move into a modern age, there are more and more of those who are interested in and want to preserve the Lakota oral tradition. Oglala Sioux scholar Delphine Redshirt addresses what is necessary to preserve Lakota oral tradition through her examination of George Sword’s translations. In 1896, Lakota George Sword transcribed 245 pages of Lakota oral tradition using the English alphabet. This was one of the first times Lakota was written, previously being a completely oral system. Redshirt says that this is “the opportunity for readers to experience Lakota oral tradition through George Sword’s narratives” (Redshirt 139). However, Redshirt goes on to write that there are a few challenges that need overcoming to fully understand Lakota oral traditions that have been converted to text.

**1. The investigator must abandon the knowledge associated with written analysis.**

When scholars attempt to interpret foreign languages that had exclusively been oral, there is often a misinterpretation. Redshirt says that there is “a bias toward written text [that] misdirects scholarly efforts when working with manuscripts from oral tradition–based narratives or poetry, in particular older or archaic texts” (Redshirt 140). Because the world of academia is so used to analyzing text, it takes the same approach when investigating Lakota oral tradition, which is what causes mistranslations. A tale told aloud and then written down is going to read very differently from an original manuscript. Therefore, it must be researched differently as well. The second obstacle to overcome when reading transcribed oral tradition also happens to be the remedy for errors in misinterpretation:

**2. The investigator must be familiar with the intricacies of the language.**

This not only applies to understanding vocabulary but the context of the vocabulary or when it is used. Redshirt references a few scholars in her publication of George Sword’s work, explaining how a familiarity with the Mother tongue of an oral tradition should be a high priority. According to Redshirt, the scholar “[Milman] Parry’s methods are based on an understanding of a specialized language that the scholar or researcher knows or has learned in order to gain knowledge and insight on the particular oral tradition that is being analyzed” (Redshirt 140), meaning that effort should be placed in learning the original Lakota language, not merely translating the oral tradition (its transcribed version) into a desired language. Redshirt also points to an established method of discovering the “register,” specialized language used in oral tradition, and thus discovering truer meaning within the story (Redshirt 140).

Even though there are ways of accessing oral tradition without

coming into contact with its source via written works, listening to a storyteller is always the preferred method of absorption. To listen to a Lakota or any Indigenous speaker is to receive insight into the values of their culture, values such as “an attachment to the land, and connection to ceremony” (Cariou 315). Cariou considers oral performance to be not just a valid academic source, but a reflection of its people. To Indigenous America, “the continued life of the story depends upon members of the community to do the work of remembering” (Cariou 315). There is a trust placed in the following generation to carry the stories of their ancestors, to be the keepers of history. I think it’s important to notice that the carriers of history in Western cultures look very different from those of Indigenous communities. Educated, male scholars (usually from privileged backgrounds) are responsible for a majority of history keeping in the West. Divisions are nonexistent when it comes to propagating oral narratives within Native American communities, negating ownership of history—it is something that belongs to no single set of individuals, but to everyone (similarly aligning with Indigenous ideas of land “ownership”). An equal distribution of knowledge is something to be encouraged by everyone as it benefits everyone.

Clearly, there are differences in the very principles of Western and Indigenous cultures as can be understood when looking at something as simple as oral vs. written tradition. So, what can those Lakota oral traditions reveal about humanity as a whole? There is a wide range of human experiences that have been passed down orally among the Lakota, and listening to their voices adds to the diverse archive of human history. They deserve to be heard because they are a part of the greater human story. Many historical figures are well-known because of the knowledge we possess of their personal lives through diaries, journals, autobiographies, etc. Similarly, we can know more about Lakota experiences through one method of record keeping called winter counts.

An offshoot of oral tradition, it eventually “leads to winter counts” (Douville 1:13). A winter count is a series of drawings depicting important events “traditionally done on buffalo hide, although other hides, pieces of paper, and strips of canvas or muslin might also suffice. Each picture represented an incident that designated a particular “winter,” or year as reckoned from the first snowfall of one winter to the first snowfall of the next” (McCoy 66). Typically drawn by a respected elder who would take counsel with their fellow elders, a winter count can give an outline of Lakota history. Not only this, but winter counts also attest to the previously mentioned importance of community within Lakota society. Dr. Robert Prue claims that “these ways of calendaring [winter counts] had the effect of supporting a community. In the winter, you get a lot of time spent telling stories together.”

To read a winter count, historians can look at a drawing and match it up with a widely known event (a war for example) and determine the year the picture represents. From there, you can go far back in time and get an idea of what the continent, and specifically the Dakota regions, looked like before colonization. The accuracy of these events is even proven by modern technology. One of the outstanding things about winter counts is that “there are some real sophisticated things in oral tradition—star knowledge,” says Dr. Victor Douville, a Lakota Studies professor at Sinte Gleska University. Following the chronology of a winter count, Douville was able to look at a picture and determine “The emergence of Cansasa Ipusye, the Dried Willow Constellation, will conjoin with the sun—they say happened in 1616 BC. So, we put in computer tracking about 1616 BC and, right on” (Douville 3:38).

Dr. Robert Prue of the University of Missouri- Kansas City, a Lakota professor of Social Work and Psychological Sciences whoI personally interviewed, also advocates for the accuracy of oral tradition and tells of a European study conducted on demonstrating this truth:

In Missouri, there was a group of researchers from Germany who were studying some of the dialects of German people here in Missouri. They discovered that they had a set of complex songs and recitations for Christmas and holidays that they were doing that had fallen out of use in Germany before WWII.

They were speaking a dialect that wasn't spoken in Germany anymore. But when [the researchers] went back and found the text, these Germans in Missouri didn't have the texts, all they had was their memories, it was word for word correct. One individual of course can't do that.

All because a group of people, a tight-knit community, decided to adhere to a tradition together, there was no need for the physical presence of a text. Accuracy was maintained by continual practice and accountability due to being a part of a larger whole.

While it's possible to align Indigenous teachings with knowledge sprung from more Eurocentric methods of discovery, it should never be a necessity for authentication. It should not be a requirement that an oral narrative be transcribed before studying because "if oral traditions must be transcribed into writing before they can be studied, then we miss out on several critical aspects of Indigenous forms of knowledge"(Cariou 314). It should not be a requirement that the Wind Cave origin story match up with the West's evolutionary theories or that "modern" scientific research proves the benefits of controlled burning in wild habitats. If we as Westerners cut ourselves off from the awareness of other cultures, we miss out on so much of the beauty that has been expressed by a part of humanity for thousands of years. It's unfair that "Indigenous communities contain many extraordinary artists, knowledge-keepers, and teachers who are not sufficiently appreciated for the work they do, simply because they do it in the medium of speech rather than writing" (Cariou 314). Furthermore, we harm Native tribes when we belittle an essential component of their culture. We aid in the extinction of a people group and their ways of life,



something that should be considered extremely immoral. To not listen to the words of the Indigenous tribes of North America is to reduce their humanity and the part they play in a larger history, a history that began far before the colonization of the continent.

There are all types of texts taught in public education whose origins are from everywhere around the world. Ancient Greek epics, British novels, and Norse sagas are considered classics to be valued and studied on a sophisticated, academic level. Douville requests that “[he] should be able to set the oral source as the foremost” (Douville 0:38), as do other Native educators. To include Indigenous oral tradition in education, especially American public education, is to expose the youth to a beautiful culture (that Westerners often believe doesn’t exist any longer) and to an often ignored perspective on an array of social topics. Prue suggests that introducing oral tradition into schools would be beneficial, especially to young children. He discusses “Schools of the Forest” in Switzerland where children are taught orally in the outdoors from an early age until they’re about 12 years old when they are integrated back into the regular school system. He says, “And when they come back into the regular school system when they’re 12, they’re of course way behind in math and reading, but they’re so far ahead in emotional development and have virtually no attention deficit. And it doesn’t take very long that they actually catch up to and, for the most part, start to exceed their peers in writing and mathematics and those sorts of things.” A high priority of the Indigenous community has always been centered around how the planet should be treated with respect because of the way it takes care of its people, a priority that the West should begin to adopt.

An oral style of teaching coupled with time spent in natural spaces creates a more empathetic and emotionally intelligent population which is exactly what the world needs. Prue also theorizes that oral tradition, specifically winter counts, can improve the symptoms of trauma and that “winter counts have a way of

showing you that not all life is tragic.” By putting life events in order as in a winter count, a person can see the many great things that have happened to them and what there is to be happy for. This could make a huge difference in the lives of young students dealing with mental health difficulties. Students with traumatic home lives could have better chances at succeeding in school with the integration of a winter count “art therapy” into the curriculum being taught. Prue concludes that “when you can get [the events] narrated and out of you, you externalize that, put it into order, and gain more mastery over the power of the traumatic memories that intrude on your life.”

Arguably, “some of the positive things that come out of [introducing oral tradition into public education] is that it breaks the stereotype of Indigenous people,” says Prue. He recounts that “I can remember growing up and people didn’t believe we had a language even, let alone keep calendars or have our own systems of medicine.” The culture and history of the Lakota and other Indigenous tribes have been neglected in the realm of academia and it’s time for a change. An Indigenous-inspired addition to the American public education system will undeniably result in a more empathetic, community-driven, healed, and successful generation of Americans who acknowledge the Native people that were here first.

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## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. The author mentions on a few occasions that it's "time for a change" when it comes to recognizing Lakota and, more generally, Indigenous cultural and historical oral traditions. What makes now the time for this change?
2. Of note in this essay is the divide between oral and written work, with Western perspectives of scholarship emphasizing the written word. Where do you stand regarding the validity of oral vs written accounts of history? What informs your decision?
3. Does the author argue for a complete shift away from written discourse, or is the argument more for the inclusion of the oral into spaces that have only valued written? What parts of the text inform your decision?
4. The author argues for the importance of noticing how the carriers of Western history look different from the carriers of Indigenous histories. What are some of those differences from your perspective? And why would those differences affect the histories we receive?