Cultural Memory*
- Review -

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Keywords: memory, remembrance, forgetfulness, identity, culture, meaning, connective structure, tradition, history

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Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance and Political Imagination was written in 1992, after studies carried on by Jan Assmann and his wife Aleida Assmann at Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin in the academic year 1984–1985.

Though internationally acclaimed ever since the last century, it is only in 2013 that *Memoria Culturală: scriere, amintire şi identitate politică în marile culturi antice* was translated into Romanian by the Publishing House of the "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University within the "Bibliotheca Classica Iassienesis" series.

While Aleida Assmann's paper *Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses* concerns the problematic of cultural memory in the Modern age, the current study refers almost exclusively to the Antiquity (and I say "almost" due to a few arbitrary examples that anchor us to the modern world).

Thus, though with a great potential of falling in the trap of studying the memory from an Egyptological viewpoint, the current study surpasses it, being a "contribution to the great theory of culture".[1]

Cultural memory is divided into two parts. The first one is dedicated to the theoretical approach of the problematic and the second one to the detailed case studies on Egypt, the Hittite Empire, Israel and Greece. We will focus our attention on the first part, while also making reference to the case studies when clearness of understanding will demand it.

What is "cultural memory"?

As early as in the *Introduction*, we find that cultural memory is an external one, a memory of the collectivity, with no connection to a neural system. It is "cultural" because it can only be done through institutionalization and it is a "memory" because it is born through socialization. Cultural memory or the culture of

* Jan Assmann, *Memoria cultural* (Cultural memory) (Iaşi: Editura Universităţii "Alexandru Ioan Cuza", 2013), 349 p. ISBN 978-973-703-903-3
[1] Assmann, *Memoria culturală*, 19.

remembrance is a universal phenomenon, it is a memory that standardizes and regulates community.

Apart from the cultural memory, Assmann also refers to three other external memories: mimetic memory, the memory of objects and communicative memory. A mimetic routine that obtains ritual status or an object that gains meaning (an icon, for instance) go beyond mimetic memory and memory of objects and grow part of cultural memory due to becoming bearers of meaning. According to the author, cultural memory is a memory of meaning transmission.

The theme of the current study is whether communicational memory follows the model of mimetic and objects' memory and whether it melts in cultural memory through the acquisition of meaning.

More than this, another goal of *Cultural memory* is the connection of three other themes, seen mainly with regard to the chosen people, the Israelites (who have a particular role in the study of this phenomenon): remembrance (or the reference to the past), identity (or political vision) and cultural continuity (or the establishment of tradition).

Every society/culture lies under the sign of a so-called connective structure. "It achieves the connection between the individual and his contemporaries by creation of a space of experiences, expectations and common actions, like a symbolic universe which through its cohesive and coercive power regulates confidence and orientation."[1] In other words, that which unites solitary individuals in a "we" is a connective structure of knowledge of rules, principles and a common past as fundamentals. Repetition is the main means through which this is done. The example that Jan Assmann gives in this context is that of the Seder celebration which, for the Jews, is more than a repetition but an actualization of Exodus. Through *Haggada*, the text book that is being read on this occasion, an interpretation of this text is achieved, in addition to its remembrance. Along with the approach of the said thematic, we have focused on this example because the author also follows the metamorphoses and alternatives of the connective structure in the Antiquity and the way that these could be compared.

Memory versus tradition and history

The past, according to Jan Assmann, is being set up by reference to itself. Talking about the past two main conditions are required: the existence of evidence of this past and the existence of a distinctive trait between the evidence and the present. "The oldest experience of that breaking between yesterday and today, where the issue of extinction or conservation is involved, is death."[2] Assmann says that death is the primary form of cultural memory. The deceased keeps living after death through remembrance. For instance, in Roman culture, the patricians held the custom of carrying the portraits and masks of their ancestors during the familial processions. An exception is raised by one of the Egyptian customs through which any man well thought of by everyone may build his own grave and write his biography in order to ensure his living after death.

[1] Ibid., 16.
[2] Ibid., 33.

Taking into account these examples, the author is talking about cultural memory related to tradition. If we were questioning ourselves about whether tradition was not sufficient in talking about collective memory, the author attempts a clarification in this respect. According to him, various phenomena described in this book could be subsumed under tradition, but in this way we lose sight of the act of interception, of the breakage with the past (if necessary) and of the negative aspects such as repression and forgetfulness.

Maurice Halbwachs, as Jan Assmann emphasizes, says that even if individual memory develops through communication, a social frame is needed too. The author of *Cultural memory* believes that this theory is functional because it explains both remembrance and forgetfulness. Besides a frame of remembrance and forgetfulness, cultural memory also demands "figures of remembrance".[1] In order to function in a group, the truth needs a concrete shape which materializes into an event, a person or a place. The remembrance needs a space (as the topography of the Holy Land) and a time (as a calendar with holidays). But more than that, the memory is in close connection with its bearers, which brings identity to the community they belong to.

The reconstruction is also tied to the belonging to a community, according to the theory of Halbwachs, continued by Assmann. When we said "reconstruction" we meant that no remembrance of the past is maintained in the initial shape, the past being a construction of each epoch. Christian topography is a valuable example in this sense. It does not commemorate facts certified by witnesses of those times but proofs of beliefs in God, which were declared *post factum.*

Last but not least, because a debate about remembrance is also a debate about history, Jan Assmann (through Halbwachs' theory) draws some explicative lines between memory (seen as collective) and history. If collective memory is interested in time continuity and similarities between epochs, history is concerned with time discontinuities and differences between epochs. For history, the periods lacking events are meaningless, whereas collective memory tries to keep a right image of the entire past. There is more than one cultural memory but only one history.

Communicative memory and cultural memory

The historical perspective refers to two planes of thought: "the originary epoch and the most recent past."[2] The two ends, the farthest (originary) past and the most recent one correspond to cultural memory and communicative memory. In the cultural memory of community, the two approaches are closely related. In contrast, communicative memory is represented by the memories that the individual transmits to his contemporaries – it is the recent past. In this case, even in literary societies, history, seen as recent past, does not go further than 80 years. A good example in this respect are the 3–4 generations in the Bible that must pass for the atonement of a guilt. The essential polarity between cultural and communicative memory could be represented by the one between sacred and profane or that between celebration and routine.

[1] Ibid., 38.
[2] Ibid., 49.

From the "what" an individual of a community remembers, Jan Assmann concerns himself with "how" he remembers it, and underlines the existence of two ways of accessing memory. It is, first, a foundational memory that refers to the origins. Next, it is a biographical memory that relies on the individual's own experiences. Foundational memory always employs concrete phenomena - rituals, dances, myths, ornaments, scenery, paintings etc. On the other hand, biographical memory has social interaction as object and goal. More than that, foundational memory is the establishment and biographical memory is the growth.

From "what" and "how" we get to "who" are the bearers of memory and implicitly of remembrance. Without the possibility of consignment by writing, the knowledge that represents the group's cultural memory has the human memory as its only localization. Be it the poet, the griot, the shaman, cultural memory always has special bearers. In societies lacking writing, the specialization of memory bearers depends on the demands imposed. For instance, in Rwanda, specialists must learn the 18 royal rituals. An interesting aspect of this is that to a temporal festive – quotidian dichotomy the approach of collective memory associates a knowledgeable elite – rest of the group dichotomy.

In cultures lacking writing, direct presence is the only way of participating to cultural memory. These participations happen within celebrations or rituals. Celebration is not opposed to the routine as a sacred time, but rather as a moment marking an important time for the community.

Remembrance as mytho-motricity

Historical conscience is part of human nature, it is a basic instinct. Forgetfulness is, on the other hand, stronger and more enrooted in human structure. Remembrance and forgetfulness are better developed in some peoples than in others. A fact that, according to Assmann, does not rely on the existence of written culture, but rather on the existence of some factors that block or stimulate remembrance.

In search of stimulators and inhibitors of remembrance, Assmann cites the theory of "cold" and "warm" societies developed by the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. By Assmann's consignment, societies that oppose the modification of their mechanism are called "cold" societies, while change-thirsty societies are named "warm". If for Claude Lévi-Strauss this categorization was not seen beyond the polarity of societies with/without history, for the author of *Cultural memory* it is nothing more than the motor of a "used" Ford that helps him carry on his journey until he finds the new Ford – a well defined theory of cultural memory. As a counter-example to the theory of warm and cold societies, Jan Assmann gives ancient Egypt – a civilized, literary society that, however, refuses a log of its history. Thus, avoiding the division of the world in two, the author thinks that societies can be both "warm" and "cold" at the same time, without the need of a categorical framing.

Having reached the subchapter *The alliance between mastery and memory*, Assman involves a primary factor in the stimulation of remembrance, which is the domination upon a people. Social transformations are desired by the ones lacking privilege, the lower classes, and their oppression is nothing but a stimulant of remembrance and implicitly of historical thinking. In this case, anchorage to the past becomes a form of resistance.

We have seen in the prior pages how foundational remembrance is seen by Assmann as a myth, but we have not got to comprehend the distance between the myth and history according to the author. We come back at this moment to a redefinition of terms for a better posterior comprehension of remembrance seen as mytho-motricity. Thus, in practice, the myth is fiction that serves a purpose, while history is reality seen as disinterested objectivity. But the past that enters the history of a community, having a foundational function, is a myth regardless of whether it is a part of fictional or a real place. For example, "the extermination of European Jews is a historical fact and thus object of historical research. In modern Israel, it has became additionally, under the name of «Holocaust », foundational history and a myth through which the state receives a great deal of its legitimacy and orientation."[1] Regarding old Israel, the neighbouring country used to have foundational histories built of cosmic myths, Israel introduces a historical myth – the Exodus and conquest of the Promised Land – and forces its historical becoming out of it.

The myth is in Jan Assmann's vision a "warm memory"[2] with two functions: a foundational one (as in, for example, the history of Exodus for Israel and the myth of Osiris for Egypt) and one that opposes the present, that starts from baneful events from the present and involves a glorious and historical past (the Homeric epopees, for example). Of course, as we are already accustomed, there is also a middle path here, a myth that can be foundational as well as counter-presential, and this is due to the significance that the myth has in the present. The significance, a force that gives orientation and identity, is called "mytho-motricity"[3] by the author. A good example of counter-presential and revolutionary mytho-motricity are the upheaval moment in the 18th and 19th century, which are based on invented tradition.

Religion is also connected with the foundational function. Religion perpetuates through remembrance something no longer current, thus producing a non-simultaneity. At the opposite end we find routine, under the form of daily needs, that produces and imposes simultaneity. A society without religion or with a reduced influence of it, as in the Western society, tends to one-dimensionality. The only form of salvation of these societies, as Assmann indirectly suggests, is cultural memory, which produces two-dimensionality in the individual's life, meaning the "possibility of living in two different periods".[4] In other words it is nothing but a function of escapism through remembrance.

From ritual to canon

Assmann considers that the switch from a ritual coherence to a textual one is similar to changing the focus from Egyptian culture, where the ritual is in charge of keeping the world moving, to Jewish culture, where the representation of the world is highly related to the interpretation of the texts. The memory of the group is carried by culture, not by some neural network. That's why through community as the identity of that particular group.

[1] Ibid., 75–76.
[2] Ibid., 78.
[3] Ibid., 79.
[4] Ibid., 83–84.

The ritual signifies a meaning. "That's why the ritual keeps living through repetition (as in the case of Seder celebration). But once a culture passes from a ritual coherence to a textual one the main type of movement, while texts aren't or may be only if they are in circulation. When it is out of movement, from a container of the meaning, the text develops into a grave of the meaning. From now on, only the interpret can read the text and bring the meaning back to life."[1] What Assmann says is that even if it becomes harder to be transmitted, the meaning is not frozen once it passes to a textual coherence, but it is replaced with other meaning. The "School of scribes" plays a major role in this development because it is the one which approves the circulation of texts and preserves unaltered the main meanings. "The House of Life" and "House of Boards" from Mesopotamia are two examples of establishments in charge of carrying the cultural memory of the texts.

The reason for passing from a ritualistic manifestation to a textual one was a so called "cessation of the flow of tradition by canonization"[2] not by the emergence of writing, as we are tempted to think. As proofs the author brings the Jewish *Bible* and the Buddhist *Tripitaka.* The Christian *Bible* and the *Koran* are two canons that are connected with those earlier mentioned. Around these forms of canon and canonization are brought to life institutions, whose main purpose is the hermeneutics of the texts, and intellectual elite (as the Jewish Rabbi, the Buddhist etc.) who deals with this kind of texts.

The canon is defined by Jan Assmann as being "that tradition whose content is absolutely mandatory and the form – inviolable".[3] In this way the carrier of the canon, the scribe, was part of the canonization of a text by keeping and giving it further with legal strictness. A good example is given by the Babylonians who protected their texts by blessings and imprecations addressed to the transmitter of the text. In the Jewish case things are different. The birth of the canonizations for the Jews starts with the collapse of the second Temple and the exodus, so with the loss of ritualistic continuity. By *Deuteronomy*, Israel survives as a so-called connective structure.

From the dawn of Antiquity until today, the meaning of the word "canon" has changed especially because of the Church. The Church was the one who claimed the status of unquestioned authority. That's why besides answering the question "what are our guiding criteria?", the canon – literary, philosophic or scientific – draws a demarcation line between A and non-A, between straight and skewed, good and bad, between beautiful and ugly, etc.

Identity and memory

Having an identity, as an individual or as a group, means having the conscience of an unconscious self image. Regarding the birth of personal and collective identity, Jan Assmann launches two apparently paradoxical theses. Firstly, he says that personal identity is a sociogenic phenomenon, which means it is born through the participation of the individual to social communication. Secondly, Assmann asserts

[1] Ibid., 91.
[2] Ibid., 94.
[3] Ibid., 103.

that "we" – collective identity – does not exists outside a multiplied "I". Then, from "I"-"we" we pass on to the triad "I"-"him"-"we" where "I" is the individual identity that makes the individual unique with respect to the others (also on a corporal level) and "him" is the personal identity, which comprises the entirety of the individual's role and social functions. In spite of the former's corporal quality and thus of the danger of the pathological manifestation, both identities are developed through reflection. The same things happen within cultural identity, where the involvement is reflexive, whereas collective identity appears like a social belonging that has become reflexive.

Thus, Jan Assmann concludes that because man is incapable of living without culture, the latter becomes second nature. "An animal adapts to its environment by instinct. Man, while lacking these instincts, must adapt to culture as a world of symbolic meanings."[1] The symbolic meaning represents here a common basis of knowledge and memories packed in a common language. At the level of face-to-face communities, for instance, dialog is the major form of transmission of social consensus, which is the knowledge that regulates the identity of a community. The myths are the ones founding this identity because they tell us "who we are, where we come from and what is our place in the Cosmos".[2] The ways of keeping this identity are the rituals in illiterate societies, and the texts in literate societies. The exception to this rule is again Egypt because here the symbol of the people's birth and the nation' founding is represented by the building of the pyramids during the 4th dynasty. Thus, whereas it is transmitted through a temple, a ritual, a text or through religion (the most effective, according to Assmann), memory, as a foundational or counter- presential myth, offers to a community its identity through what the author calls "cultural memory".

[1] Ibid., 138.
[2] Ibid., 144.