Book Review


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Indigenous religious traditions have been characterised commonly in academic literature as preliterate or nonliterate, implying that they represent remnants of early phases in human social evolution. In this book, Susan Elizabeth Ramírez argues convincingly that Indigenous societies transmitted memory of their traditions effectively without written records through a variety of means including songs, dances, chants, rituals, storytelling, relating ancient myths to landscapes (toponyms), mnemonic devices connected to material objects, and art (including pottery, tapestry, rock painting and engravings). The notion that written texts are superior to the variety of ways Indigenous traditions have been preserved, Ramírez maintains, reflects the Western worldview of time as linear and fixed rather than porous, relative, and subject to changing perspectives. That the dominant view of the superiority of written records can be challenged, what Ramírez calls thinking ‘culturally unthinkable thoughts’, is shown in this book to be necessary or ‘we will be condemned to looking only for information that confirms our own pre-conceived notions’.

Ramírez chooses to demonstrate the power of non-written ways of transmitting and preserving community memory by focusing on an often-overlooked method that was used in numerous Indigenous societies, ‘positional inheritance’. Ramírez borrowed this term from the anthropologist Ian Cunnison, who first coined it in the 1940s to describe the importance of names as he discovered it in his work among the peoples living in the Luapula region of Northern Rhodesia, now Zambia. Following Cunnison, Ramírez defines positional inheritance as
a system of inherited names within a kinship group’. This is based on the idea that names adopted by living members of a group carry the memory of those who have died, sometimes four or five generations removed. In this way, names enshrine the memory of a lineage and thereby re-enforce inherited authority in the social and religious system.

The author illustrates how positional inheritance applies through three case studies, each comprising a chapter of the book. The first looks at Central Africa, largely by focusing on the Lunda of what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo. A second case study examines the use of names among the peoples who formed the Iroquois Confederacy in the Eastern United States and Canada in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The final case study represents the author’s own area of expertise in the history of Andean ethnic groups. In this section, she surveys naming practices among societies living in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in regions that comprised the Inca Empire stretching from what is now Ecuador through Peru to Bolivia.

Among the Lunda of Central Africa, as described by Ramírez, early Portuguese explorers and missionaries reported that each successive paramount chief took the name Kazembe in memory of the autochthonous ancestor of the same name. Ramírez explains that group knowledge and religious traditions were kept safe through the lineages that were preserved by each successive Kazembe. This pattern was repeated also among extended families where elders and headmen inherited the name of prior communal leaders. Ramírez explains that individual names had ‘content’; they were the ‘repositories of lineage’. When a new name was assigned to individuals corresponding to one who had recently died, they also adopted the same role and responsibilities in society as the one they succeeded. Ramírez refers to the transmission of names from generation to generation by the term ‘perpetual kinship’. Although this practice might imply a static social system, the transmission was not unvarying, nor was it always consistent. Oral traditions enabled current generations to re-interpret the meanings of names to fit present circumstances in ways that would be more difficult in societies where traditional authority was sanctioned by written texts.

The Iroquois Confederacy of Northeastern North America in the mid-seventeenth century consisted of five nations determined by kinship loyalties. Collectively, they were called in their own language the Ho-De’-No-Sau-Nee, also known as the Haundenosaunee, meaning ‘People of the Longhouse’. The five original nations were the Seneca, the Cayuga, the Onondaga, the Oneida and the Mohawk. The Tuscaroras were incorporated into the Confederation in the early eighteenth century. Originally, each nation was known by the name of its chief, but as the Confederation solidified, it was organized into a league of fifty
chieftaincies that collectively exercised legislative, executive and judicial authority. Ramírez contends that positional inheritance applied in the transmission of a name from chief to chief among the tribes forming the Confederation. It was widely held that the new chief was the reincarnation of the chief who had died. This applied also in family situations, in which it was believed that the spirit of a deceased person could not rest until someone within the family took the name of the dead person as a replacement. Just as it was in Central Africa, the person who assumed the name of the deceased person took on the same roles and responsibilities as had been performed by his or her predecessor. If a blood relative could not be located to fit the name of the deceased person, another was chosen and adopted into the family. The importance of naming is confirmed by reports that a deceased person’s name could not be uttered between the time of the person’s death and the passing on of the name to a successor. Ramírez summarizes the importance of names in maintaining the collective memory for the Ho-De’-No-Sau-Nee nations as a process whereby ‘the living participated in recreating the founding lore of their families, lineages, tribes, and nations’, and in the case of the chief, ‘repopulated and reinvented the Confederation’.

The third case study represents Ramírez’s own area of specialization. Much of the chapter is devoted to describing the relationships between the Indigenous populations within the Inca civilization and Spanish invaders. The confusion among the Spanish about the significance of names and the distrust of the colonizers by local communities led in many cases to inaccurate representations of how the Incas preserved the memory of their traditions. Nonetheless, Ramírez finds a consistent use of positional inheritance among the Incas where the central role of ancestors was displayed through naming conventions. An infant was given a name that reflected characteristics normally associated with an ancestor of the same name. By the time the child reached the age of between two and five, a second name was given. At puberty, boys took another name. As the male grew older, if he achieved something noteworthy, such as success in military ventures, he could adopt yet another name. When a person became king, he took an entirely different name, abandoning his previous names. The new royal identity, because it contained the memory of the succession, was considered sacred and thus the king’s name was never uttered in public. Instead, subjects of the king addressed him in a series of ‘praise names’, which reflected the shared attributes of the present king with those who had preceded him. Over time, individuals who held names may have been forgotten but the name remained as a reminder of great events and thus the name acted, in Ramírez’s words, as an ‘archetype … that linked the present to the renowned achievements back to the apical ancestors’.
The final chapter of the book returns to theoretical considerations raising issues of the conflict between myth and history, the differences between cyclical and linear understandings of time and includes an analysis of Marshall Sahlins’s structural interpretation of myth. Despite her insistence that oral traditions offer new perspectives on how cultural memory is preserved, transformed and transmitted, Ramírez continues, particularly in the final chapter, to refer to Indigenous peoples prior to contact with European explorers and missionaries as ‘preliter-ate’. Of course, this could simply operate as a descriptive term aimed at outlining the relationship between pre- and post-colonial historical eras. Nonetheless, the connotation persists that oral societies were less advanced than literate ones and only became ‘civilised’ with the introduction of writing. Ramírez clearly wants to contest this unexamined assumption, but a niggling doubt persists in the mind of this reviewer that she has not applied her own critique of potentially distorting prior conclusions consistently to her own use of descriptive language.

Perhaps the most important insight one can take away from this detailed and impressive study relates to critical questions about the meaning, use and ownership of knowledge. Ramírez underscores this point near the end of the book when she states: ‘Understanding the nature—both generation and use—of knowledge is fundamental to understanding and evaluating the knowledge itself’. That the value placed on knowledge is relative and perspectival emerges clearly in her concluding analysis where she brings the reader back to the key concept she used to tie her comparative case studies together. She contends that ‘positional inheritance’ provides a model for evaluating ‘the flexible native customs of creation and preservation of memories’ and, at the same time, reveals ‘incongruities in both insider and outsider accounts’. If this book achieves nothing else, in Ramírez’s words, it invites ‘scholars to reflect on oral traditions and what they divulge’. Although this may sound a modest goal, to achieve it requires academic courage and innovative thinking.