

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-18802-9 - Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing,  
Remembrance, and Political Imagination

Jan Assmann

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction

In the Pentateuch, we are told four times that children must be taught the meaning of rituals and laws:

And when thy son asketh thee in time to come, saying, What mean the testimonies, and the statutes, and the judgments, which the Lord our God hath commanded you? Then thou shalt say unto thy son, We were Pharaoh's bondmen in Egypt; and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. . . . (Deut. 6:10)

And it shall come to pass, when your children shall say unto you, What mean ye by this service? That ye shall say, "It is the sacrifice of the Lord's Passover, who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt, when he smote the Egyptians. . . . (Exod. 12:26)

And it shall be when thy son asketh thee in time to come, saying, What is this? That thou shalt say unto him, By strength of hand the Lord brought us out from Egypt, from the house of bondage. . . . (Exod. 13:14)

And thou shalt shew thy son in that day, saying, This is done because of that which the Lord did unto me when I came forth out of Egypt. . . . (Exod. 13:8)

That which unfolds before us here is a little drama of personal pronouns and remembered history. The son talks of "you" and "us" (the Lord our God), and the father answers with "we" or with "I/me." These verses are made into the "Midrash of the Four Children" as part of the Haggadah, the liturgy that accompanies the Jewish ceremonial meal of Seder, which is nothing less than a lesson to teach children about the exodus from Egypt. Four questions (including the one that

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-18802-9 - Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing,  
Remembrance, and Political Imagination

Jan Assmann

Excerpt

[More information](#)

is not asked in Exod. 13:8) are distributed among four children: the clever, the bad, the simple, and the one who does not yet know how to ask questions. The cleverness of the clever child is exemplified by the manner in which he distinguishes between concepts (testimonies, statutes, judgments) and expands the second person “you” into the first person “our.” The father tells him the story using “we” to incorporate the questioner. The badness of the bad child is evinced by his exclusive “ye”:

How does the bad child ask his question? “What mean ye by this service?” “Ye” does not include himself! And so, just as he excludes himself from the group, you must also shut him out by answering: “This is done because of that which the Lord did unto me when I came forth out of Egypt.” (Pesach Haggadah)

This little drama touches on three of the themes of this book: identity (“we,” “you,” and “I”), memory (the story of the exodus from Egypt that provides the basis and the substance of “we”), and reproduction and continuity (the relationship between father and son). During the feast of Seder the child learns to say “we” because he is drawn into a story and a memory that form and fill the concept of the first-person plural.<sup>1</sup> This is, in fact, a problem and a process that underlies every culture, but it rarely comes so sharply into focus as it does here.

This book deals with the connection between these three themes of memory (or reference to the past), identity (or political imagination), and cultural continuity (or the formation of tradition). Every culture formulates something that might be called a connective structure. It has a binding effect that works on two levels – social and temporal. It binds people together by providing a “symbolic universe” (Berger and Luckmann) – a common area of experience, expectation, and action whose connecting force provides them with trust and with orientation. Early texts refer to this aspect of culture as justice. However, it also links yesterday with today by giving form and presence to influential experiences and memories, incorporating images and tales from another time into the background of the onward moving present, and bringing with it hope and continuity. This connective structure is the aspect

<sup>1</sup> On the catechism as a form of historical memory and identity formation, see A. de Pury and T. Römer, 1989, “Memoire et catechisme dans l’Ancien Testament,” *Histoire et conscience historique* (CCEPOA 5, 1989), 81–92.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-18802-9 - Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination

Jan Assmann

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

of culture that underlies myths and histories. Both the normative and the narrative elements of these – mixing instruction with storytelling – create a basis of belonging, of identity, so that the individual can then talk of “we.” What binds him to this plural is the connective structure of common knowledge and characteristics – first through adherence to the same laws and values, and second through the memory of a shared past.

The basic principle behind all connective structures is repetition. This guarantees that the lines of action will not branch out into infinite variations but instead will establish themselves in recognizable patterns immediately identifiable as elements of a shared culture. The ceremonial feast of Seder once again provides a clear illustration of this: this Hebrew word actually means “order” and refers to the strictly prescribed course that the feast must follow. Even the terms “prescribe” and “follow” go to the heart of the whole concept – namely, time. On the one hand, the internal, temporal, organization of the ceremony is fixed, and on the other, each celebration is linked to its predecessor. Because all such festivals follow the same “order,” they entail repetition just like the patterns on wallpaper in the form of unending rapport. I call this principle “ritual coherence.” Seder night, however, not only repeats the ceremony of the previous year by following the same ritual but also re-presents or “presentifies”<sup>2</sup> an event from a far more remote past: the Exodus. Repetition and presentification are two very different forms of a single reference. The term “Seder” refers only to the repetition, whereas the presentification or realization of the experience is expressed by the term *Haggadah* – the book that is read on this occasion. This is an often richly illustrated collection of blessings, songs, anecdotes, and homilies that all relate to the escape from Egypt. They may be seen as interpretations of the biblical tradition and are meant above all to explain these events to children. The *Haggadah* is also a prescription, with the emphasis on “script,” because it is an interpretation of a text. Memory of the past is brought to present life through the explanation of a tradition.

All rituals combine these two elements of repetition and re-presentation or presentification. The more rigidly they stick to an established order, the more predominant the aspect of repetition is.

<sup>2</sup> On the concept of *presentification* see Chapt. 2, n. 5.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-18802-9 - Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing,  
Remembrance, and Political Imagination

Jan Assmann

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The more freedom they give to individual expression, the more the aspect of re-presentation comes to the fore. These provide the two poles between which the dynamic process develops that gives writing its all-important function in the connective structure of cultures. It is through the written element of traditions that the dominance of repetition gradually gives way to that of re-presentation – ritual gives way to textual coherence. A new connective structure emerges out of this, which consists not of imitation and preservation but of interpretation and memory. Instead of liturgy we now have hermeneutics.

Different studies are examined in this book in an attempt to extrapolate a typological analysis of textual coherence from this concept of culture. My focus is on comparisons between and variations in the changes and characteristics that mark the connective structure, and I examine the process that leads to its establishment, consolidation, loosening, and even dissolution. The term “canon” is used to identify a principle that elevates a culture’s connective structure to a level at which it becomes impervious to time and change. Canon is what I might call the *mémoire volontaire* of a society, in contrast to both the more fluid “stream of tradition” of early civilizations and the self-regulating *memoria* of postcanonic culture, the contents of which have lost their binding force. Societies conceive images of themselves, and they maintain their identity through the generations by fashioning a culture out of memory. They do it – and this is a crucial point for this book – in completely different ways. I investigate *how* societies remember, and how they visualize themselves in the course of their remembering.

Although current discussions of posthistory and postmodernism would provide us with sufficient material for study, this book deals only with the Ancient World. That is partly because it is my own specialized field, and partly because, in her book *Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses* [Arts of Memory], Aleida Assmann focuses on the cultural memory of the modern age. However, despite this limitation, this book also transcends the borders of my specialty, Egyptology, in a manner that some may find unacceptable and that certainly requires a word of explanation. The arguments and concepts developed in Part I of the book are illustrated in Part II by case studies drawn from Mesopotamia, the Hittites, Israel, and Greece, as well as Ancient Egypt. In my defense, I would like to emphasize that

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-18802-9 - Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing,  
Remembrance, and Political Imagination

Jan Assmann

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

I am not concerned here with presenting research material as such – which would naturally be restricted to my own special field – but my object is to reconstruct cultural connections or, to be more precise, to establish the links among (collective) memory, written culture, and ethnogenesis as a contribution to a general theory of culture.

Such contributions have been and are being made by scholars from a wide variety of fields. They include Johann Gottfried Herder and Karl Marx, Jacob Burckhardt, Friedrich Nietzsche, Aby Warburg, Max Weber and Ernst Cassirer, Johan Huizinga and T. S. Eliot, Arnold Gehlen and A. L. Kroeber, Clifford Geertz, Jack Goody and Mary Douglas, Sigmund Freud and René Girard, and the list goes on and on. Poets and novelists, sociologists, economists, historians, philosophers, ethnologists – only archaeologists have for the most part remained strangely silent on this topic. However, there can be no doubt that a study of early civilizations can shed a great deal of light on the nature, function, origin, communication, and transformation of culture, and that is precisely my starting point.

It is normal to present definitions at the start of such a study. The reader has every right to know what is meant by the term “cultural memory,” why it is both valid and meaningful, what phenomena it may help to illuminate more efficiently than other terms, and how it transcends the more established concept of tradition. Cultural memory refers to one of the exterior dimensions of the human memory, which initially we tend to think of as purely internal – located within the brain of the individual, and a subject of encephalology, neurology, and psychology but not of historical cultural studies, the contents of this memory. However, the contents of this memory, the ways in which they are organized, and the length of time they last are for the most part not a matter of internal storage or control but of the external conditions imposed by society and cultural contexts. Maurice Halbwachs was the first to focus directly on this phenomenon, and his arguments form the subject of my first chapter. I would like to distinguish between four areas of this external dimension, and cultural memory is just one of them:

1. “Mimetic memory.” This refers to action. We learn different forms of behavior through imitation. The use of written instructions relating to machinery, cooking, construction, and

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-18802-9 - Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing,  
Remembrance, and Political Imagination

Jan Assmann

Excerpt

[More information](#)

so on, is a relatively modern and never comprehensive development. Action can never be completely codified. Other areas such as everyday manners, customs, and ethics still depend on mimetic traditions. It is this mimetic aspect that René Girard has made the central platform of his numerous books, which develop a cultural theory that draws much of its impact from this one-sidedness.

2. “The memory of things.” From time immemorial human beings have surrounded themselves with “things,” from private everyday objects such as beds, chairs, crockery, clothes, and tools to houses, streets, villages, towns, cars, and ships.<sup>3</sup> They all represent our concepts of practicality, comfort, beauty, and, to a certain extent, our own identity. Objects reflect ourselves – they remind us of who we are, of our past, of our forebears, and so on. The world of things in which we live has a time index that refers not only to our present but also, and simultaneously, to different phases and levels of our past.
3. “Communicative memory.” Language and the ability to communicate are again developed not from within oneself but through interchange with others, with circular or feedback interplay between interior and exterior. The individual physiology and psychology of consciousness and memory are inexplicable, and as a result they demand a systemic explanation that will incorporate interaction with other individuals. A person’s consciousness and memory can only be formulated by way of his or her participation in such interactions. However, we need not go into further detail here, as this aspect is covered in our discussion of Maurice Halbwachs’s theory of memory.
4. “Cultural memory.” This is the handing down of meaning. This is an area in which the other three aspects merge almost seamlessly. When mimetic routines take on the status of rituals, for example, when they assume a meaning and significance that go beyond their practical function, the borders of mimetic action memory are transcended. Rituals are part of cultural memory because they are the form through which cultural meaning is both handed down and brought to present life.

<sup>3</sup> This corresponds to what Maurice Halbwachs calls *entourage matériel*.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-18802-9 - Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination

Jan Assmann

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

The same applies to things once they point to a meaning that goes beyond their practical purpose: symbols; icons; representations such as monuments, tombs, temples, idols; and so forth, all transcend the borders of object-memory because they make the implicit index of time and identity explicit. This aspect is the central point of Aby Warburg's "social memory." The degree to which the same can be said of our third area, language and communication and the role played by writing, is the real subject matter of this book.

At this point, I would like to look back at the history of this line of inquiry. At the end of the 1970s, a circle of specialists in cultural studies came together – experts on the Old Testament, Egyptology, Assyriology, Classical Philology, Literature, and Linguistics – to research the "archaeology" of the text or, to be precise, of the literary text. At that time, these questions were approached on a very abstract, theoretical level. The objective of this new study group was to move away from theory and into two different dimensions: temporal depth and cultural distance. Several books resulted from this project under the collective heading *Archäologie der literarischen Kommunikation* [Archaeology of Literary Communication]. At the group's first conference on the topic of "The Oral and the Written," the term "cultural memory" was proposed within the context of the literary text. Konrad Ehlich defined this as a *wiederaufgenommene Mitteilung* [message returned to later] within the framework of a *zerdehnte Situation* [extended situation]. The original setting of the text is the institution of the messenger.<sup>4</sup>

Out of this concept of the extended situation emerged what Aleida Assmann and I – continuing the research of Jurij Lotman and other culture theorists – have called cultural memory in our own work.<sup>5</sup> Exactly what this means can best be described in technical terminology. The extension of the communicative situation requires possibilities of intermediate, external storage. The system of communication

<sup>4</sup> Konrad Ehlich, "Text und sprachliches Handeln. Die Entstehung von Texten aus dem Bedürfnis nach Überlieferung", in A. Assmann/J. Assmann/ Chr. Hardmeier (eds.), *Schrift und Gedächtnis. Archäologie der literarischen Kommunikation I*. München 1983 24–43.

<sup>5</sup> Aleida Assmann and Jan Assmann, "Schrift, Tradition und Kultur", in W. Raible (ed.), *Zwischen Festtag und Alltag*, Tübingen 1988, 25–50; J. Assmann, "Kollektives Gedächtnis und kulturelle Identität," in J. Assmann and T. Hölscher (1988a), 9–19.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-18802-9 - Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing,  
Remembrance, and Political Imagination

Jan Assmann

Excerpt

[More information](#)

therefore has to develop an external area where communications and information – of cultural importance – can be processed through forms of coding, storage, and retrieval.<sup>6</sup> This requires institutional frameworks, specialization, and, under normal circumstances, systems of notation such as knotted cords, *churingas*, calculi, and, finally, writing. Writing emerged everywhere from such systems of notation, which were developed within the functional context of extended communication and the required mode of intermediate storage. There are three typical fields or functional contexts for symbolic representation: economics (e.g., near-eastern counters), political power (Egypt), and identity-giving myths (e.g., Australian *churingas* and songlines).

The invention of writing opened up the possibility of an all-encompassing, revolutionary transformation of this external area of communication, and in most cases, this transformation actually occurred. At the stage of pure orality or orality plus notation systems prior to writing, the intermediate and external modes of communication storage remained closely linked to the actual system of communication. Cultural memory coincides almost completely with whatever meaning is circulating within the group. It is only through writing that this external area of communication is able to take on an independent and increasingly complex existence of its own. Only now can a memory be formed to extend the message or meaning beyond the limitations of its original time and its original mode of communication, just as the individual memory can extend beyond the range of present consciousness. Cultural memory feeds tradition and communication, but that is not its only function. Without it there can be no infringements, conflicts, innovations, restorations, or revolutions. These are all eruptions from a world beyond the current meaning, through the recalling of the forgotten, the revival of tradition, or the resurfacing of what has been suppressed. They represent the typical dynamism of written cultures that led Claude Lévi-Strauss to categorize them as “hot societies.”

<sup>6</sup> Under the key term *extériorisation*, André Leroi-Gourhan, *Le geste et la parole*, Paris 1965 describes the technological evolution of external data storage from primitive tools, through writing, card indexes, and punch cards, to the computer, and he calls this a *mémoire extériorisée* (1965, 64). The bearer is not the individual or, as with animals, the species, but the *collectivité ethnique*. Merlin Donald (1991, 308–15) speaks of “External Storage Systems” (ESS) using “exograms.”

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-18802-9 - Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing,  
Remembrance, and Political Imagination

Jan Assmann

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

As with all the more complex instruments, writing – in an even more distinct manner – gives rise to a dialectic of expansion and loss. The automobile, as an externalization of natural movement, allows for a hitherto undreamed-of expansion in the range of human travel, but if overused, it also reduces our natural, unaided mobility. The same applies to writing: as an externalized memory, it facilitates a hitherto undreamed-of expansion in our capacity to store and retrieve information and other forms of communication, while simultaneously leading to a shrinkage of our natural memory bank. This problem, which was already noted by Plato, still preoccupies psychologists.<sup>7</sup> It is not just the individual who is affected by these possibilities of external storage; even more important, the whole of society and the communications that help to formulate that society are affected. This externalization of meaning in turn opens up another very different dialectic. The positive new forms of retention and realization across the millennia are counterbalanced by the negative forms of loss through forgetting and through suppression by way of manipulation, censorship, destruction, circumscription, and substitution.

We need a term to describe these processes and to relate them to historical changes in the technology of storage systems, in the sociology of the groups concerned, in the media, and in the structures of storage, tradition, and the circulation of cultural meaning – in short, to encompass all such functional concepts as tradition forming, past reference, and political identity or imagination. That term is cultural memory. It is “cultural” because it can only be realized institutionally and artificially, and it is “memory” because in relation to social communication it functions in exactly the same way as individual memory does in relation to consciousness. Cancik and Mohr suggest (1990) that instead of the “metaphor” of collective memory we should use the time-honored concept of tradition, leading to a foreshortening of cultural phenomenology and its dynamics, similar to reducing the concept of individual memory to that of consciousness. However, we should not allow ourselves to be led astray by a battle over terminology. No matter what name one gives to this externalization of social tradition and communication, it is a phenomenon in its own right:

<sup>7</sup> F. H. Piekara, K. G. Ciesinger, K. P. Muthig, “Notizenanfertigen und Behalten,” *Zeitschrift für Pädagogische Psychologie* 1987, 1, H.4, 267–280.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-18802-9 - Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing,  
Remembrance, and Political Imagination

Jan Assmann

Excerpt

[More information](#)

a cultural sphere that combines tradition, awareness of history, myth in action, and self-definition, and that – a crucial point – is subject to the vast range of historically conditioned changes, including those brought about by the evolution of media technology.

In borderline cases, this comprehensive area of memory, which extends far beyond whatever meaning has been communicated or handed down, takes on such a solid consistency that it can even contradict the social and political reality of the present. I refer to such cases with the labels “contra-present memory” (G. Theissen) and “anachronous structures” (M. Erdheim). These are enhanced, artificial forms of cultural memory that use cultural mnemotechnics to produce and maintain “nonsimultaneity.”

This study of cultural memory therefore focuses on such processes of transformation and enhancement, examining the decisive changes within the connective structure of a given society. In particular, I consider and analyze two approaches that highlight these changes although, in my opinion, they do not go far enough in explaining them. The first, which goes back to the 18th century, was the central point of A. Weber’s all-embracing theory of culture and was subsumed by K. Jaspers under the simple heading of the Axial Age, whereas its sociological consequences were explained by S. N. Eisenstadt. It traces the changes back to innovations connected solely with the history of ideas: visions of a transcendental basis for living and for understanding life as set out by individuals like Confucius, Laotse, Buddha and Zoroaster, Moses and other prophets, Homer and the tragedians, Socrates, Pythagoras, Parmenides, Jesus and Muhammad – ideas that were then taken up by new generations of the intellectual elite and put into operation to radically transform the reality in which they were living.

The second approach, of much more recent vintage, is today represented mainly by the Hellenist Eric A. Havelock and the anthropologist Jack Goody, together with an expanding group of evolutionary (Niklas Luhmann) and media (Marshall McLuhan) theorists. They see these and other transformations mainly as the effects of technological developments such as the invention of writing and of the printing press.

It is greatly to the credit of both approaches that they draw attention to the changes and uncover many important connections. However,