CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-48463-3 - Narrating our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History
Elizabeth Tonkin
Excerpt
More information

INTRODUCTION

The argument

> The past is myself, my own history, the seed of my present thoughts, the mould of my present disposition.

The words are R. L. Stevenson's, and they were borrowed by Christabel Bielenberg for the title of her autobiography, which describes her life in Germany between 1934 and 1945. These for her were central and dramatic years. She recalls a past which was 'another country' in more than one sense. She experienced Nazi Germany at first hand and she can tell outsiders what it was like from within, looking back on a world that has thankfully gone.[1] But she was not formed by the same pasts that had moulded the people she came to live amongst. Her own background affected her perceptions and directed her actions, even as she also became involved in events in Germany that in turn would change and develop her too. Their effects would live on in her, the 'seed of present thoughts'.

We can look at the past in different ways. To historians, the past is 'another country' which we can try to reconstruct from the traces left behind. If there are living survivors, they can be asked – or, as with Christabel Bielenberg, they can ask themselves – what their memories will yield about life in that different country. It is also possible to explore, in Stevensonian vein, *how* the past is 'myself'; in what ways could it mould our dispositions? Why is it that across the world, people seem to remember different aspects of the past? These questions interest me as a social anthropologist, and in this book I try to answer them.

I look at the interconnections between memory, cognition and history, and show how they help to shape our individual selves. Individuals are also social beings, formed in interaction, reproducing and also altering the societies of which they are members. I argue that 'the past' is not only a resource to deploy, to support a case or assert a social claim, it also enters memory in different ways and helps to structure it. Literate or illiterate, we are our memories. We also try to shape our futures in the light of past experience – or what we understand to have been past experience – and, representing how things were, we draw a social portrait, a model which is a reference list of what to follow and what to avoid. The model is part of the processes we live in and call 'group', 'family', 'institutions', 'society' and it

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-48463-3 - Narrating our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History
Elizabeth Tonkin
Excerpt
More information

helps to reproduce or modify them. Sometimes these processes and structures from the past are overturned; then there is a social revolution.

In all this huge web of life, *representations* of the past have a significant and very varied part. In order to think about the past, one must represent aspects of it to oneself, or to others. The representations need not even be verbal, but as soon as a representation is communicated or interrogated, words enter in. And as 'the present' is a perpetually disappearing moment, so all languages allow their speakers to refer back. References to past events are continual, and judgments about them, explicit as well as assumed, occur in everyday conversation. They can be elaborated into lengthy discourses, but such discourses are not wholly distinct in either method or intent from briefer reference. Written accounts such as history books are, by the same token, shaping representations which operate through a second-order sign system, since the code of literacy represents the phonology and semiotics of language.

In more than one language, the same word – in English it is 'history' – has to stand both for 'the past', history-as-lived, and 'representation of pastness', history-as-recorded. It is easy to slip from one meaning to another because of the different ways that the past lives in the present and judgments about events which are themselves representations of pastness can also be a form of action. The ambiguity will be found in this book sometimes, because it is there in the sources, and also because the main focus is on the act of representing. I argue that one cannot detach the oral representation of pastness from the relationship of teller and audience in which it was occasioned.

Because history-as-recorded is a representation, it must be understood as such. Verbal representations are chains of words, either spoken or written, ordered in patterns of discourse that represent events. Arguments and opinions too are forms of words. When we grasp a historical fact or interpretation, we have ourselves made an extremely complex bunch of interpretations to do so. Facts and opinions do not exist as free-standing objects, but are produced through grammar and larger conventions of discourse which in turn are interpreted by hearer or reader in order to register as such. Meanings exist because people mean and others believe they understand what was meant.

The different conventions of discourse through which speakers tell history and listeners understand them can be called *genres*. A genre signals that a certain kind of interpretation is called for. To literates, for example, the layout of a sonnet suggests that one should not interpret the words as one would a mathematical equation. Genres provide a 'horizon of expectation' to a knowledgeable audience that cannot be derived from the semantic content of a discourse alone.[2] Since genres are the level of discourse through which interpretation is organised, any analyst seeking to

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-48463-3 - Narrating our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History
Elizabeth Tonkin
Excerpt
More information

understand a verbal message must learn the genre. Oracy has its genres just as literacy does, but their conditions include the circumstances of orality. Whereas literate genres are signalled by internal and external form, such as the sonnet's rules of scansion and its visual representation in fourteen lines, the oral genre can be signalled by the occasion, or the status of the teller.

When we consider that representations of pastness – a cumbersome phrase, but more exact here than 'history' – are made by persons in interaction, situated in real time and space, we can see that however modest the speaker's aim, they are purposeful social actions. This is so whether the past-oriented reference is a long, structured discourse, or just a brief comment or allusion. In either case, too, interlocutors must share knowledge of language rules and conventions of phrase to make sense to one another. So an outsider also needs to understand the mode or genre in which the temporal accounts occur in order to grasp the character of the interlocutors' social action and to evaluate the information that the account conveys. Such understanding has to be triadic:

> To grasp their historical intent we need to view [representations of pastness] as literature; to grasp their literary mode we need to view them as part of social action; to grasp their role as social action we need to see their historical intent.[3]

This book, therefore, connects the characteristics of tellers with those of their audiences, and both with the structure of their narrations. The representations of pastness that these interconnections involve include the occasion, when teller and listener intersect at a point in time and space, as well as the times recounted. So the temporalities in question include the tellers' own pasts, till that moment of telling, and the adjustments they make to their tales on account of their listeners' pasts. And, as Alessandro Portelli points out, 'to tell a story is to take arms against the threat of time . . . the telling of a story preserves the teller from oblivion'. Told as it must be at a specific time and in a phase of irreversible time, the tale itself creates a special time, 'a time outside time'. 'Time is one of the essential things stories are about.'[4]

The representations of pastness discussed here are oral ones, because orality is the basic human mode of communication, and although peoples all over the world now use literate means to represent pastness, and written records have existed for many hundreds of years, the business of relating past and present for social ends has for most of the time been done orally; it still is so. The argument is the stronger when one understands how memory and cognition are interconnected in highly literate and non-literate peoples alike. Where there is little or no literacy, there can still be skilled historians, and part of the book is devoted to understanding how their representations of pastness are constructed. I argue that such 'oracy' – skilled orality – is

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

Cambridge

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-48463-3 - Narrating our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History
Elizabeth Tonkin
Excerpt
More information

found among literates as well, but literacy has far greater prestige, and so it is literate skills that receive study.

That genres are social products of particular temporal and economic conditions, realised in varying interpretations by different audiences, must be as true of literary examples as it is of oral ones. In this book, I concentrate the discussion on oracy. Actually, it is not as easy to distinguish literate from oral as some suppose; I return to this point later in the Introduction. 'Historioracy' is here treated as a counterpart of historiography, and I suggest it too can be studied, with varied traditions that can be analysed comparatively. An important point is that in oracy, as in literacy, genres, practices and traditions develop and change: the difficulty is to recover past states. But the very conditions of rapid change that cause oral recordists' struggles to collect material 'before it's too late' often give us the opportunity to see changes in the making – as they have always been.

In this book, the construction of 'oral history' is treated as a profoundly social process which is also bound up simultaneously with different temporalities. To some, a social perspective and a historical one are antithetical, the one looking at connections over time, the other to relationships at any moment and so in a sense timeless. In their practices, the direction of historians' and anthropologists' or sociologists' interests will certainly be different, but insofar as they are studying human beings in society, the theoretical premises of their enquiries ought to be consonant. To use one sort of analysis for the 'social' part of a practice and a contradictory analysis for its 'historical' aspects makes for very unsatisfactory conclusions when the practice is examined as a whole: this is not a case of opposed theories in obstinate co-existence, as with wave and particle theories. The model of social cognition and historical production presented here is intended as a unified model, with which to understand human beings situated in time and space, where societies, ideas and material conditions change.

A key question is the nature and status of the individual, and I consider it throughout: what is this self that the past 'is', and of what significance to others? When we consider that representations of pastness enter continually into different kinds of discourse and are produced in different kinds of society, any discussion leads inevitably to debates on *agency*, that is to the status of the 'I' who authors statements, and of the *subject*, a topic in literary and social analysis alike. Again, I argue for a model which takes into account both the material conditions whose importance can be recognised in social theory and the shaping power of language and form which is assumed in literary criticism, even though its character is debated through competing theories there, just as social theorists argue over the primacy of class and material factors of production.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-48463-3 - Narrating our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History
Elizabeth Tonkin
Excerpt
More information

The uses of illustration and case studies

I have tried to illustrate and develop my argument through examples from different times and places. Given careful thought to their conditions of production, and following the argument that accounts of pastness are socially constructed through the intervening power of genre, apparently diverse cases should be comparable, not taxonomically, whereby 'a genre' is identified according to its degree of fit, by form, into a universal classification, but by comparing social conditions of production and aesthetic practices. On this basis, it becomes possible to recognise oral genres, not just literary ones, and to compare the oral performances of literates and non-literates, as I discuss further below. Several of my sources are from Europe and America, other examples are from Africa. The choice of African material is due to my own background, and it is also the background of much debate on oral art. Students of oral history in Britain have looked to Africa for examples of what is presumed to be a live 'oral tradition' there. Ruth Finnegan and Jan Vansina, two leading writers on oracy, have worked in Africa and use African examples.

There are two sources from which I draw several examples. One is Yorubaland, whose millions of members live in South West Nigeria, and also across the border in Benin. Their rich oral arts are now being recorded in writing and have received skilled analysis, so it is possible to begin to see the range of Yoruba oral genres, and how they interconnect. For all the interest in African orality, 'it is sobering to reflect that after well over a century of collecting material, there is scarcely a single African society for which we have a comprehensive literary record'.[5]

The second source for examples is a small polity in Liberia, known in English as Sasstown, and in their own Kru language as Jlao. I have lived there and listened to people's histories, so I can exemplify from Jlao genres in their social context which I have studied myself. This is not a book about Jlao or its oral history, but an outline of Jlao history, its recent social organisation and the kinds of historians I found there in the 1970s is presented in Chapter 1. Jlao is focalised there, so that readers can get a rounder sense of what oral history accounts can be like in communities where literacy is still not omnipresent.

Some readers may prefer to use the Jlao case study for reference only; it contains after all, as any African case study must do, unfamiliar detail for many readers, and illustrations of genres whose contents are very different from those of industrial Europe or America. One reason for starting with this case study is that by later chapters, when I refer to Jlao examples among others, readers will hopefully share a little of that common context which all speakers and listeners in oral genres presuppose. One then begins,

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-48463-3 - Narrating our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History
Elizabeth Tonkin
Excerpt
More information

haltingly, to get some sense of how oral genres work in performance. The complexity and richness of some oral genres can only be asserted and exemplified in a general study like this one, but it's important to see that oral historians have powers which become clearer by detailed study, as in any work of art.

The details of content and construction that I give from my own findings, or from the publications of others, are intended to illustrate the skills and achievements of oral tellers. I recorded accounts by the outstanding historian Sieh Jeto which continued over several hours and were powerfully organised. When one considers that appreciation of such work comes, as when reading a book or attending a play, from an accumulating response to a long and substantially built whole, with many levels and dimensions, it's easy to see that to do justice to his art would take a book on its own. His art cannot be properly demonstrated here, the more frustratingly so since narratives of this scale and scope have been largely ignored or discounted in studies of oracy. Sieh's skills in organisation and plotting are discussed in the last part of Chapter 1, where I argue that it is through these means he directs interpretation; they are part of the meaning.[6]

Structuring conventions

It follows from the argument of this book that professional historians who use the recollections of others cannot just scan them for useful facts to pick out, like currants from a cake. Any such facts are so embedded in the representation that it directs an interpretation of them, and its very ordering, its plotting and its metaphors bear meaning too. However, if you share the author's conventions of interpretation, your own matching skills are deployed so automatically that no gap is recognised between yourself and the text. The meaning seems transparent.

One advantage of examining unfamiliar material is that this transparency vanishes. Having to translate, one finds words and phrases recalcitrant because they are embedded in different contexts from those presupposed in one's own language, and they segment and categorise the world in different ways. Thus, Jlao Kru *tú* means 'tree' and smaller species; it also refers to many objects made of wood, such as drums. English 'wood' refers to the substance too, but it labels many trees together, not on their own. More difficult are the very different ways in which languages code temporality, as I illustrate in Chapter 4. Here, apparent transparency can be very misleading, but, equally, a good knowledge of the language may reveal how people are using the resources of their language's tense and aspect systems to foreground attention or indicate the status of a report; the import of oral histories may obviously be affected by such means.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-48463-3 - Narrating our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History
Elizabeth Tonkin
Excerpt
More information

Although some language rules seem absolute, others can be flexible: people play on them. Since languages point to existing worlds, they have systems of address which work politically. Speakers may compete, not only for the right to hold the floor, but to have their own version of events accepted. I discuss in Chapter 2 how speakers must both authorise what they say as best they can and also orient themselves to their subject. They have to take a point of view on an event and on its relation to themselves and to their interlocutors. 'Bias', therefore, is an essential part of any communication, and not a flaw to which oral tellers are particularly prone.

Each language has its own system within which these claims and orientations have to be made. To the English, Indonesian languages with five distinct styles to use for different status relationships seem highly constricting, but to Indonesian speakers these styles can be a rich means of countering others' claims. Outsiders can find British language use exceedingly tricky. Ours is often a listener's game, marking a speaker up or down on some tiny nuance of accent or phrase. Most people don't recognise, consciously, that there are language-bound expectations about the placing of central and peripheral topics; they may then hear other placings as 'incompetent' or 'stupid'.[7]

Representations of pastness have no unique linguistic status. They work like any other discourse and are subject to the same constitutive conditions. They are composed of *mimesis* and *diegesis*, to use Aristotle's terms, that is the representation of direct speech, and the description of nonverbal events. A story is a mixture of 'a non-verbal matter which the narrative must represent as well as it can and a verbal matter which presents itself and which the narrative need simply quote'.[8] We can pause to note, however, that a narrator must re-present in time as well as through words, and that the direct speech is also a re-play of action. Any sustained speech, or writing, which includes more than one sentence is organisationally not reducible to the analyses of its component sentences. Listeners/readers make connections between the sentences and interpret them not wholly as isolates but in relation to one another. The successivity of sentences makes discourse because we simultaneously expect their connectivity. This cohesion of discourse depends on presuppositions which are not all deducible from the verbal surface.

If we are told 'The king died. His cousin was king', the 'his' of the second sentence must, by linguistic rule, refer 'cousin' to 'king' in the first sentence. Contextual evidence is required for us to evaluate whether the succession is normal or abnormal, but we must assume that the cousin succeeded and not the other way round because that is what the English sentence order tells us. This tiny example suggests the complexity of knowledge tucked away in any narrative, the possible linguistic opacity of the focus or direction of narrators to their subject matter, and the importance of

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-48463-3 - Narrating our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History
Elizabeth Tonkin
Excerpt
More information

understanding how the discourse is constructed if one wants to understand its presentation of time.

Jonathan Culler said, speaking as a structuralist, 'Discourse has the power to produce events: events of persuasion, understanding, revelation etc.'[9] A researcher and informant engage in discourse, but it is not the same type of discourse as the researcher's report. The discourse structures of conversation are also sometimes in sentences which are shared between speakers. 'You mean that' – 'Yes, that what one starts' 'Another can finish!' 'It's not even as simple as that. Conversation goes on even when presuppositions are not all shared.' Oral discourse can likewise be a lengthy monologue, itself varying in style and embedding in a maze of discursiveness riddles, proverbs, folk tales and myths – forms which are often studied on their own as examples of 'oral literature'. The narratives of Sieh Jeto are of this kind: their mode is historical, their means varied.

The conventions of discourse structure it at many levels. Historians have labelled as 'myth' what seem unrealistic ways of representing the past, but it can sometimes be shown that mythic structures encode history, that is they register actual happenings or significant changes. 'Realism', on the other hand, is an equally culture-bound judgment of likelihood. An audience always has expectations about the nature of reality, and judges whether the linguistic and genre patterns, as well as the content of the discourse, are appropriate for its representation. The qualifications of the teller must be scrutinised. 'Realism' includes criteria of intelligibility and rationality which are open to dispute, as for instance between those who believe in Divine intervention or in witchcraft and those who do not.

Truth, that elusive historical goal, can also lie in the intersection of narrator and discourse, where we have to see how accounts are authorised. The polysemy is significant, for the act of authoring is a claim to authority. How it is achieved varies generically and politically and culturally, as does the kind of truth claimed, expected or accepted. The historian who adjudges another only as an imperfect source of facts is probably using a different set of criteria from that other, but both sets derive from authorisations. There are, for instance, socio-political conditions determining the authority of the narrator, or which the narrator invokes as guarantees. Philosophers may look for truth conditions in the sentential structure of language itself: that is, discourse is the locus of logical consistency and therefore of authenticity. A genre of discourse can carry with it a claim to a particular kind of truth. How, asked Frank Kermode, do we know that the Gospels mean more than they say? He answers from the properties of the narratives and the necessity of their interpretation. Their authenticity is a claim embodied in the narrative.[10]

Truth conditions are different when Jlao Kru appear in court. It is accepted that they may 'deny' what actually happened; it is up to their

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-48463-3 - Narrating our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History
Elizabeth Tonkin
Excerpt
More information

opponents to prove them wrong. But this adversarial limitation of liability occurs under conditions which do not include, as they would in my society, the imposition of an oath. The question may then arise whether a particular description of the past is an adversarial narrative of this kind or not. The social context of delivery, its occasion, may be definitive, and not the narrative content.

There is another crucial connection between narrator and narrative. An apparently obvious but still often missed point follows from the condition that narration entails a relation to events described and the choices of relation – which can vary from sentence to sentence – *are* points of view. It is that these points of view need not be held personally and subjectively by their narrators. A first-person narrator in a fiction is created by the author. Indeed, the existence of a real me in a narration depends on your theories of self. Likewise, since not all literature shows the self-conscious split between narrating and authoring that is evident and played upon in fiction and drama today, there are obvious questions as to the conditions in which this sense of selfhood and indeed alienation occur. Oral narrators can also create complex selves, as we shall see.

Senses of history and its social structuring

People talk of 'the past' so as to distinguish 'now' from a different 'then'. At the same time, every 'now' is the consequence of many 'thens', of vastly different durations, in an amalgam unique to each person experiencing it. What goes on now is interpreted from previous knowledge, from memory. The present we live in is built from past events. Family, school, work skills: these are practices which may have a much longer life than anyone suspects, or, sometimes, be no sooner invented than they seem out of date. We live in other people's pasts whether we know it or not and whether or not we want to do so.

What history we actually know varies widely too. Appreciation of pastness may be a practical consciousness, people doing what they know how to do and realising that it has been done before. At the other extreme are the discursive accounts of academic historians. As schoolteachers wryly acknowledge, memory depends on interest, and pupils who seem to remember nothing may be able to list football results for years back in immense detail. I suspect that if one could reconstruct what numbers of people actually assume the past to be made up of,[11] the results would appear to be a muddle of sub-categories, and not at all a good match with professional world-histories. It is easy to be a university specialist in, say, nineteenth-century American political history and yet as hazy over the difference between Jurassic and Paleolithic as most fifteen-year-olds.

How people perceive the past varies too. An obvious example is

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-48463-3 - Narrating our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History
Elizabeth Tonkin
Excerpt
More information

historical painting: why is it that in the Middle Ages, 'Alexander the Great or Moses were represented ... as knights, in the armour of the day'? In medieval times evidences survived which could suggest that fashions and social patterns had changed, but Peter Burke and others have argued that it was not till Renaissance times that there was a slow acceptance that laws could change, that the Bible had not existed eternally but been written down by humans, in our world of time, and that the evidence of eyewitnesses and ancient 'authorities' was not of the same kind.[12]

Some think that ordinary Europeans and Americans only began to think of the past as qualitatively different from the present in the late eighteenth century.[13] Our interest in pastness can continue to change. There have been out-door museums, or even preserved birthplaces of well-known people, only in some countries and in recent times. In 1971, I looked at a hill covered with scrub, with occasional ruins barely visible, which we were told had been an important industrial site. Since then, Blists Hill has been cleared, many of the ruins restored and further houses and massive engineering transported there, to be testimonies, in the Ironbridge Gorge Museum, to the Industrial Revolution which we can say was born in this steep Shropshire valley of the River Severn where cast-iron was developed.

Blists Hill 'presents' what is at the same time a distant past to some and to others still part of their experience. Children are puzzled by 'old money' familiar to adults, charcoal irons are recalled by the very old and also by those who may be still using them where there is no electricity. The volunteers whose imagination, knowledge and hard labour have 'restored' the area had a very different consciousness of the past than the many, many others who just saw grubby desolation. 'Industrial archaeology' seemed an impertinent oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. Now, people have caught up with the fact that much industry is no longer modern but history. Nostalgia replaces distaste at a spoiled countryside, but it is part of a much wider enthusiasm for viewing the past in the present (a safely inaccessible past, conserved as jam is different from fruit).

The social structuration of recall

Such changes of interest and perception about pastness and its significances cannot be explained purely in individualist terms. We can see this in debates over what should be taught as history. The arguments on this question arise partly because our identities are both personal and social, as I show throughout this book. Individuals may therefore be supported or threatened by public representations of pastness that seem either to guarantee their identity or to deny its significance.[14]

Understandings of pastness vary immensely, as other examples in this book also show. Why did a 'sense of history' as that is now understood

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org