

October 2023



Oral Tradition and Storytelling

Stories of creation, heroes, and natural phenomena have been passed down orally within cultures for generations. Some view the Oral Tradition as primitive and unreliable, while others recognize it with the same value as formal scholarship. This issue of Multicultural Moments highlights the oral tradition and storytelling and its importance in society.

What is Oral Tradition? This section will define and give examples of oral tradition and highlight the importance of storytelling.

- **Definition.** A basic definition of oral tradition is "a community's cultural and historical traditions passed down by word of mouth or example from one generation to another without written instruction." ([Oral tradition Definition & Meaning | Dictionary.com](#))
- **Examples.** Oral tradition comes in many forms, including "proverbs, riddles, tales, nursery rhymes, legends, myths, epic songs and poems, charms, prayers, chants, songs, dramatic performances, and more." (<https://ich.unesco.org/en/oral-traditions-and-expressions-00053>)
- **Storytelling.** Storytelling is one of the oldest and most common forms of oral tradition, existing long before writing. In many cultures, storytellers are highly respected members of society. For examples of storytelling traditions from diverse cultures, read National Geographic's [Storytelling and Cultural Traditions](#).

Benefits of Oral Tradition and Storytelling. Whether told from memory or read from a book, listening to stories is a common childhood experience, but stories have benefits beyond childhood entertainment.

- **Teaching Values and Sharing Culture.** In this video, "[The Oral Tradition of Storytelling](#)," Storyteller Ken Quiet Hawk shares several purposes of the oral tradition of storytelling. Examples include preserving traditions, sharing cultural history, and teaching others how to live well.
- **Preserving Knowledge.** In the 2018 article "[The Oldest True Stories in the World](#)," Patrick Dunn notes that "orally shared knowledge can demonstrably endure more than 7,000 years, quite possibly 10,000..." The author further explains that in this way, oral traditions are like books that hold memories and information in the "mental libraries" of the storytellers.
- **Neurological Stimulation.** Studies have found a neurological connection with storytelling that benefits people of any age. Listening to a story can cause "many different areas of the brain to light up," and the listener's connection with the storyteller can lead to shifts in perspective and changes in behavior. (See the NPR piece, [Storytelling's Power To Connect Us, Shift Perspective And Spur Action](#).) In addition, storytelling can promote empathy, as explained in the infographic [Storytelling Creates Empathy](#).

- **Understanding and Protecting the Environment.** In a 2021 *State of the Planet* article, "[Narrating Landscapes: How Indigenous Storytelling Can Unlock our Environment's Past](#)," author Sasha Starovoitov explains how indigenous creation stories, such as those passed down orally by the Blackfoot Tribe in the Northwestern plains, contain details that align with scientific findings related to the landscape and environment. These stories have been excluded from academic knowledge for so long, but recent studies suggest these indigenous stories can uncover clues that inform researchers about past events.

Keeping Storytelling and Oral Tradition Alive. Oral tradition might be used to preserve stories of the past, but it is not a thing of the past. Indigenous groups and institutions such as the [National Museum of the American Indian](#) sponsor and support oral tradition and storytelling events. Below are two additional examples of efforts to preserve the practice.

- **Storytelling Education and Events:** Blogs such as *International Storyteller* maintain resources for storytellers and aspiring storytellers to continue the craft. In addition, the age of technology has helped the craft expand to digital storytelling efforts, such as the [International Digital Storytelling Conference](#) led by the Storytelling Academy and [The Story Center](#), which promotes "healing, growth, and social change by creating spaces for listening to and sharing stories."
- **Research.** Harvard University maintains an open-access journal dedicated to oral tradition. The journal started at the University of Missouri in 1986, publishes "research on the creation, transmission, and interpretation of all forms of oral traditional expression, as well as investigations of relations between oral and written traditions, brief accounts of important fieldwork, and editions of oral texts." Peruse [Oral Tradition Journal at Harvard University](#) for past and current volumes of the journal.

May we avoid blaming or bias based on our circumstance and continue to be grateful for the gifts of the global community.

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