

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

LATIN AMERICAN ORAL NARRATIVES

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Overview In Latin America, oral narratives have created an important link to the past. Despite attempts by the Europeans to extirpate the very roots of the indigenous belief systems and cultural identity, they persisted by means of oral narratives. The oral narratives have served to transmit and reinforce a sense of cultural identity, and they have provided continuity and resilience as they have evolved and responded to political, economic, and technological changes.

ANCIENT PERIOD

Maya: The Maya possessed a written language which was accompanied by many oral narratives which persisted long after their vast cities had been abandoned. The oral narratives existed within the speakers of all the different Maya dialects, and they had several stories in common: a creation narrative; an apocalyptic narrative that recounted the destruction of the world and its subsequent re-creation; and many stories about the gods and their relationship with people.

POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

Aztec: Like the Maya, the Aztecs (the Nahuatl peoples) carried their oral tradition with them. Not only did the oral tradition consist of stories, it also included poetry, songs, creation myths, and predictions about the end of the world. The Nahuatl language and oral traditions have been a vital force in maintaining cultural identity.

Inca: The Inca's oral narratives focused on the stars. They truly believed that each person is a descendent of people from the stars, and as such, they were a race of starmen. Each village had a special place constructed specially for sacred rituals. The location of the sacred place corresponded to where the son of the Sun God (Manco Capac) emerged from caves. Part of the oral narratives for each village included being able to point to the sky and to say precisely which star was that village's star of origin.

Tupi-Guarani: The Tupi-Guarani lived in the jungles and savannah areas of southeastern Brazil and in Paraguay and northwestern Argentina. Their language still lives in Paraguay, and so the oral narratives have persisted. Their core belief system is very animistic, with shamans as their spiritual leaders. The focus is on understanding one's true nature, and then to find and enhance their core essence. Oral narratives focus on shape-shifting and finding affinities with animals, especially the jaguar, which would then help one develop the qualities valued by the culture.

EARLY MODERN PERIOD (COLONIAL)

Folklore-Christian Blends: During the Conquest, places of worship were burned, priests tortured and killed, sacred text burned, and all the values that had been held sacred were gutted. The goal of the Spaniards was to expunge the indigenous belief system from collective memories of the people and to replace it with Catholicism. That did not work; instead an assimilation process occurred by means of narrative blending. Catholic saints were connected to existing Maya, Aztec, Inca, and African deities, and the stories enacted in Pre-Hispanic dance and ritual were incorporated into the rites and rituals of the Catholic Church.

Virgin Mary Apparitions: During the brutal process of conquering and controlling the indigenous peoples and imposing the Catholic Church, a strange phenomenon began to occur. Stories of mysterious appearances of a female entity, who manifested pure love, forgiveness, and redemption, started crop up throughout the conquered lands, many times in the depths of despair, sickness, and loss. The indigenous people held to these stories for comfort and as an assurance that there was a loving deity who would bless them in their dark times. For the Mexicans, it was the Virgin of Guadalupe. For the Paraguayans, it was the Virgin of Caacupe. Stories spread as well that if one prayed to her and showed devotion (walking to the church on their knees, for example), she would bless and heal family members. These beliefs are in force to this day.

Miracle Sightings: Stories of miracles began to abound during colonial times. Stories of patron saints performing miracles, especially when all hope was lost, started as early as the 16th century. Corresponding to the sightings and stories of miracles were the development of pendants in the shape of hands, legs, hearts, or other part of the body meant to be healed. The charms were produced and then left at the feet of the statues of the patron saints. The charms are called “Milagros” (miracles), and they corresponded to a story of a miraculous events.

Treasure Tales: Partially to appease the Spanish and partly to motivate them to move on down the road to another village, a number of stories of treasure were invented and shared with the treasure-hunting Spanish adventurers. Several became very well known because they resulted in long, expensive wild goose chases. The most famous was the “Seven Cities of Cibola” which originated in New Spain (Mexico) and claimed that there were seven cities made of gold, far to the north. The Spanish explorer, Francisco Vazquez de Coronado traveled through Oklahoma, Kansas, and New Mexico, but found nothing. Another such story claimed that the town of Quivira (somewhere in what is now Oklahoma or Kansas) also was built of gold. It was not. It was built of thatched huts. But, at least the tale got the gold-hungry Spanish hounds of war away from those in New Spain (Mexico) who felt they had experience quite enough of the Spanish enthusiasm for gold.

African Folklore Assimilation: The African slaves brought with them folklore and religious beliefs as well as music, food, and attitudes about life. The methods of transmitting belief among the African diaspora varied from region to region. The oral narratives were rich in characters that were direct transfers from West Africa. For example, there were a number of trickster characters. The most well-known was Anansi, the Spider, always quick-witted and able to survive. Other tricksters included the hare and the tortoise. Another such being is the shape-shifting “Papa Bois,” who can appear as a deer or a strong old man with leaves in his beard. He is the guardian and protector of the forest and people who respect nature.

19TH CENTURY

Heroic Narratives during Independence (Political Propaganda): Stories and tales of both valor and cowardice were disseminated in Latin America during the wars of independence. The stories served to motivate individuals to join the military forces. The oral narratives took the form of stories that recalled the narratives used during the French Revolution, but with a twist: they focused on heroic exploits of those who resisted, and they framed them in a nationalistic frame in order to show how breaking away from Spain would also allow the affirmation of identity.

Ghost stories: Doomed lovers, tragic miscommunications, and falsely accused young men constitute a large part of the ghost stories, which seem to attach themselves to most of the older colonial towns. The fact that many of the tales are incorporated into tourist spectacles calls into question their authenticity. But, as an oral narrative, whether or not it is absolutely faithful to the actual events is not as important as the motives, impact, and eventual appropriation by another group who might find it useful to have the “Doomed Lover” tale or the “Heroic Sacrifice” tale in their arsenal.

Mining Tales: As prolific yet quite dangerous mines were placed into operation in Peru, Ecuador, Mexico, and Bolivia, the miners shared stories of the ghost, strange creatures (dragons and giant snakes) and unhappy gods. For example, in Bolivia, miners tell tales of El Tio (The Uncle), the lord of the underworld, and explain that if one does not place the proper offerings in small altars in the mine, there will be an accident.

20TH CENTURY

Urban Legends: Children tell each other ghost stories, people email supposed testimonials, and parents tell bedtime stories of creatures that have their origins in folklore, but which have been modified to fit the times. Supernatural creatures include the Chupacabra (Puerto Rico) that comes in the night to attack and drink one’s blood. La Llorona (Mexico), is a weeping woman who kidnaps children. Some are cautionary tales, and others include a strange wild woman of the forests with magical powers known as Ciguapa (Dominican Republic). Others omens, such as the whistling apparition whose presence presages death, El Silbon (Venezuela and Colombia). Some are tricksters such as the apparition with a large hat who stirs up trouble, the Sombreron (Guatemala).

Celebrity Legends and Scandal-Making: With the advent of newspapers, television, and later, internet-based communications and social media, celebrity and political scandals have served to sell products and shape public

opinión. Oral narratives are often repeated in the form of “memes” which are transmitted through society social media, email, mass communication, and more. The impact of social media and the desire to promulgate oral narratives for one’s own ends can be found in the political satire, *La Dictadura Perfecta (The Perfect Dictatorship)*, a Mexican film directed by Luis Estrada and released in 2014.

Discussion/Questions

1. The beliefs about the origin of the human race in Pre-Hispanic cultures in Latin America share one thing in common: they were created by gods as fully formed human beings. However, their myths of origin differed in many important ways. Please compare and contrast the Aztec, Maya, and Inca myths of origin and explain how the beliefs may shape their sense of identity, and their use of calendars, religious rituals, etc..
2. Rather than disappearing altogether, the pre-Conquest beliefs persisted, especially when certain Catholic saints as well as Catholic rites and rituals echoed some of the ones that had been practiced by the indigenous groups. Contemplate the way that the indigenous practices (as well as ones from West Africa) incorporated itself into the Catholic Church in Latin America and propose ways it could have created problems for the Creole and mestizo ruling classes. Describe the social benefits of blending in the indigenous deities and religious practices. At what point should the blending (or assimilation) stop?
3. Explain how oral narratives can serve as cautionary tales and codes of conduct for a society. If ghost tales are primarily cautionary tales, and also examples of what might happen if one transgresses the norms, how might they change over time, as rulers, laws, and political systems come into power?
4. Discuss the role of oral narrative in times of revolution or large-scale political change. How might stories of heroic sacrifice motivate young, impressionable men to take action?
5. Describe urban legends and the reason why they tend to propagate quickly and enthusiastically. In a time of identity shaped by social media, what are some of the anxieties that urban legends reveal to us? Also, how do urban legends mirror a culture’s ambivalence about change, technology, and outsiders (the “Other”)?

Readings

Blayer, Irene Maria F, and Mark Anderson, editors. *Latin American Narratives and Cultural Identity: Selected Readings (English, French, and Spanish Edition)*. New York: Peter Lang Publishers, 2003.

Carey, David. *Oral History in Latin America: Unlocking the Spoken Archive*. Forward by Alessandro Portelli. London: Routledge, 2017.

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