

WHAT IS CULTURAL MEMORY? (PART-1)

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Abstract:

The paper explores one of the major emerging fields in Memory Studies that is Cultural Memory. The concept of Cultural Memory is explained by various theorists like Maurice Halbwachs, Aby Warburg, Pierre Nora and Aleida and Jan Assmann in different ways. The paper discusses different theories of Cultural Memory and helps the readers to know about the concept.

Key words: Cultural Memory, remembering, collective memory.

The term memory is becoming more popular in current discourses. The study of culture becomes interesting, when we add the terms like mentalities, identities, ideology, symbols, texts and performance. Memory as a discipline has the potential to integrate distinct elements. The practice of remembering and reflecting on that practice has become an important part of sociocultural, interdisciplinary and international phenomena.

Remembering and forgetting are major themes in contemporary literature and art. In the last two decades memory has become an interdisciplinary phenomenon and a key concept in established fields. All the established fields like philosophy, sociology, history, archeology, religious studies, literary and art history, media studies, psychology and the neurosciences are trying to explore the connection between culture and memory. Memory cannot be restrained to a single discipline. It is a trans-disciplinary field. Memory Studies or Cultural Memory Studies has emerged as a multidisciplinary field.

It is not an easy thing to track the terminology of memory. There are multitude of terms and concepts of memory. To put roughly in chronological order from the 1920s *memoire collective*, *Mnemosyne*, *storia e memoria*, *lieux de memoire/ sites*, or *realms of memory*, *cultural memory vs communicative memory*, *social memory*, *memory cultures*, *cultural remembrance*, *social forgetting*, *the cultural brain*, *memory in global age*, and *transcultural memory* are the most influential terms. ‘Memory’ is attributed with different meaning in different disciplines and contexts like historical, social, national or linguistic. “Memory is an umbrella term for all those processes of a biological, medical, or social nature which relate past and present (& future) in sociocultural contexts” (Erl, *Memory in Culture* 7)

Cultural Memory is the totality of the context within which such varied cultural phenomena originate. The term ‘memory’ can be demarcated from the individual or collective remembering in order to draw attention toward different cultural dimensions and symbolic forms of memory. Cultural Memory can be defined as “the interplay of present and past in socio-cultural contexts”

(Erll, *Cultural Memory Studies* 2). This definition allows one to include a broad spectrum of phenomena ranging from individual acts of remembering in a social context to group memory of family, friends, etc. to national and transnational memory.

Actions of cultural remembering appear to be a fundamental component of human anthropology, and the development of shared heritage and theorizing about memory may be traced back to antiquity, including Homer, Plato, and Aristotle. But scholarly curiosity about the occurrence did not emerge until the first decade of the 20th century. Varieties of societal historical memory were rigorously observed and became the subject of social science and humanities inquiry. Nonetheless, the core premise of the discipline about the created nature of cultural memory also holds true for the level of theory: Each and every theoretical hypothesis regarding the elements or purposes of cultural memory is a fabrication and more of an academic “invention.”

Two traditions in particular, both of which have their roots in the 1920s, have influenced cultural memory study today: Aby Warburg's interest in a European memory of pictures and Maurice Halbwachs' sociological studies on *mémoire collective*. The first researchers to rigorously examine the phenomenon of cultural memory within the context of a modern theory of culture were Halbwachs and Warburg, who gave it the names “collective” and “social,” respectively. Yet, it wasn't until the 1980s that “new cultural memory studies” and other related fields in the humanities and social sciences reignited interest in the subject of memory. The idea of Pierre Nora's *lieux de mémoire* has proven to have the greatest global impact. Aleida and Jan Assmann created a theory that is the most comprehensive globally and the most authoritative in the German-speaking world around the same time with their concept of a “Culture Memory.”

1. Maurice Halbwachs: Mémoire Collective:

In three publications, Henri Bergson and Emile Durkheim's student and French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs created the notion of *mémoire collective*, which is now a key idea in the study of cultural memory. He attempted to prove that memory is influenced by social structures in his 1925 publication *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (*The Social Frameworks of Memory*). In doing so, he disagreed with the individualistic theories of memory advanced by his contemporaries Henri Bergson and Sigmund Freud. Even his colleagues at the University of Strasbourg, Charles Blondel and Marc Bloch, expressed strong opposition to Halbwachs' theory, which considers even the most private memory to be a *mémoire communale* or collective phenomenon. Afterwards, it was claimed that Halbwachs and the Durkheim School in general had improperly grouped people with different psychological characteristics.

In response to this criticism, Halbwachs started to develop his theory of communal memory in a subsequent book. He worked on the book *La mémoire collective* (*The Collective Memory*) for more than 15 years until it was published posthumously and in part in 1950. Before that, Halbwachs did release a third book in which he provided examples of the different types and uses of memory.

Halbwachs' research on collective memory in particular and the interest in the cultural aspect of remembering in general were largely disregarded in the years following World War II. But today, there are almost many theoretical models of cultural memory that do not incorporate sociologists. One can identify three main areas of analysis in Halbwachs's studies on *mémoire collective*, which point to three prominent directions of research on cultural memory: first, his theory of the dependence of individual memory on social structures; second, his studies of the forms of intergenerational memory; and third, his expansion of the term *mémoire collective* to include cultural transmission and the creation of tradition. Hence, Halbwachs integrates two fundamentally important but fundamentally dissimilar conceptions of collective memory:

1. Collective memory as an organic form of memory for a person that functions in a sociocultural context.
2. Collective memory is the process by which individuals and big cultural communities alike construct shared memories of the past through interaction, communication, media, and institutions.

a. Cadres Sociaux: the social frameworks of individual memory:

His idea of *cadres sociaux* is the basis of Halbwachs' theory of collective memory. In the first section of *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, Halbwachs provides a thorough explanation of the collective components of individual memory utilizing his views on dreams and language. He arrives to the conclusion that every act of remembering necessitates the use of social cadres, or social frames. According to Halbwachs, social frameworks begin with the people in our immediate surroundings. Humans are social beings; without other people, a person cannot access his or her own memory, in addition to such obviously collective phenomena as language and conventions. This is partially due to the fact that we frequently encounter issues at work. Yet, for Halbwachs, the idea that we learn about dates and facts, common perceptions of time and space, and methods of thinking and feeling from our interactions with and communication with other people is far more fundamental. We are able to recognise, understand, and recall the past because we take part in a common symbolic order. Our social surroundings, or *cadres sociaux* in the literal sense, gives rise to “social frameworks” in the metaphorical meaning: *Cadres sociaux*, in a metaphorical sense, are cognitive schemata that steer our perception and memory in specific ways. Hence, social frameworks create the vast horizon that is the foundation for our perception and memory. They are made up of cultural social, material, and psychic phenomena.

According to Halbwachs, social frameworks communicate and interpret the information stored in collective memory, the pool of common information and experiences that are pertinent to the group. There is a communal memory and social frameworks for memory in this sense, and our individual thinking is only capable of remembering things to the extent that it participates in these frameworks and this memory. Our memories are socially constructed, our perception is group-specific, and both are improbable without the existence of a collective memory. Yet, unlike the individual's physiological memories, the collective memory is not a supra-individual entity. Instead, it might be argued that a person remembers by imagining himself from the viewpoint of

the group, but it can also be said that the memory of the group realizes and shows itself in individual recollections.

b. Intergenerational Memory and Religious Topography:

In the second section of *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, Halbwachs sets forward sociological case studies that focus on family, religion, and social class while also differentiating between various types of collective memories. A typical intergenerational memory is a family memory. It is via social engagement and communication that this form of collective memory is created. Those who did not personally experience the past might nonetheless share in the memory through the recurrent remembrance of the family's past (often through oral tales given at family gatherings). Eyewitnesses and descendants engage in a living memory exchange in this manner. So far as the oldest members of the social group can recall, that is the extent of the collective intergenerational memory.

Halbwachs draws a clear line between history and memory, which he views as two types of historical reference that are mutually exclusive. In *La mémoire collective*, Halbwachs notes that generic history starts only when tradition stops and the social memory is fading or splitting up at the outset of his contrast of “lived” memory and “written” history. Memory and history cannot coexist; according to Halbwachs, history is neutral in its coordination of all previous events and is therefore universal. Contradictions and rifts are essential to history. Contrarily, collective memory is specific; its bearers are limited in both time and space groups, whose memories are highly evaluative and hierarchical.

History, in Halbwachs' opinion, is about the past. Contrarily, collective memory operates in a highly selective and reconstructive way since it is focused on the wants and requirements of the group right now. Throughout the journey, memories might change and shift to the point where the outcome resembles fiction more so than historical fact. Thus, memory does not offer a faithful recreation of the past; on the contrary, it is said by him that a memory is in very large measure a reconstruction of the past achieved with data borrowed from the present, a reconstruction prepared furthermore by reconstructions of earlier periods where past images had already been altered. This already hints at what would be referred to as “the creation of reality” in post-structuralist. Three dimensions of Halbwachs's concept of *mémoire collective* and fields in which they have been applied Halbwachs's *mémoire collective*

1. Dependence of Individual Memory on social frameworks → Social Psychology
2. Intergenerational Memory → Oral History
3. Transmission of Cultural Knowledge → Theory of the ‘Cultural Memory’.

2. Aby Warburg: Mnemosyne – Pathos Formulas and a European Memory of Images:

The second key idea in the cultural memory was developed by a scholar in the 1920s named Aby Warburg (1866–1929), an art and cultural historian, is now regarded as a key pioneer of the contemporary, interdisciplinary study of culture, and the Warburg Library, once located in

Hamburg, is seen as its symbol. Warburg's distaste for the “policing of disciplinary borders” was evident in its initial structure. He arranged his sizable collection in accordance with cultural-historical themes, promoting a strategy that crosses the boundaries between many eras, mediums, and genres. The Warburg Library was connected to a group of notable researchers, including Ernst Cassirer, Erwin Panofsky, and Hellmut Ritter. Aby Warburg was interested in the reappropriation of vivid images and symbols in various eras and cultures. Warburg noticed a resurgence of artistic forms, such as the use of classical fresco motifs in Renaissance paintings by Botticelli and Ghirlandaio or on stamps in the 1920s, but instead of attributing this to the deliberate appropriation of earlier cultures by later artists, he instead credited the ability of cultural symbols to evoke memories.

The so-called pathos formulas, or *imagines agentes*, were of particular importance to Warburg. In an effort to capture the “superlatives” of human expression—passionate ecstasy in gesture or physiognomy—Renaissance artists turned to the symbols of old models. Warburg referred to these symbols as “pathos formulae” because he believed they were reflections of the ancient pathos, or pagan emotional intensity. He used a model proposed by the memory psychologist Richard Semon and conceptualized pathos formulas as cultural “engrams” or “dynamograms,” which store “mnemonic energy” and are able to release it under different historical circumstances or at far-off locations, to explain why the affective properties of these symbols had such an unusual staying power across the centuries.

Warburg claims that the symbol serves as a cultural “energy storage.” The memory of symbols is the foundation of culture. In this approach, Warburg created the idea of an image-based cultural memory, which he referred to as “social memory,” among other things.

The notions of cultural memory held by Halbwachs and Warburg are fundamentally unlike. Warburg did not construct any overarching theories or systems, but Halbwachs' writings serve as an example of the intricate development of a theory. Warburg followed his well-known maxim, “God is in the details,” and started with the substance. His strategy centres attention on the tangible aspect of culture. Warburg investigated how things and symbols could induce nostalgia and foster cultural continuity. His main focus was on highly expressive visual culture, which he believed to be intimately tied to unconscious, mental processes. But he had such a broad understanding of the subject that he also included items from popular culture, festivals, and literary sources in his research. Halbwachs's approach, in contrast, starts with the social component of culture. He was mainly concerned with how social groups develop a past that is connected to their identity since he considered this as an active, positive process that is attentive to the demands of the present.

The view that culture and its transmission are outcomes of human effort, however, unites the two concepts. This presumption was definitely not common during the start of the 20th century. Several scientists tried to use the idea of “racial memory” to explain the phenomena of cultures' survival. They were motivated by Darwin, evolutionism, and the bio-logical and deterministic theories of the turn of the century. Halbwachs and Warburg should be commended for demonstrating that social interaction and the codification of transitory culture in tangible

objectivations—rather than any type of genetic memory—are what will ensure its survival. The two academics also showed through their methodologies that an interdisciplinary approach is necessary in order to fully understand the phenomenon of cultural memory.

3. Pierre Nora's lieux de mémoire – and beyond:

Although, Halbwachs and Warburg's ideas are now recognized as having contributed to theories of cultural memory, they had a very small audience when they were first published. It took until the 1980s for the concept of memory as a collective phenomenon that creates and sustains culture to be widely rediscovered. Pierre Nora's notion of 'lieux de mémoire', which revolves around memory, history, and country, was established within the subject of French cultural history and is one of the most important concepts of the interdisciplinary "new cultural memory studies" developing in the late twentieth century. In order to define the many different popular and political ways of confronting the past, which he - and this is Halbwachs's legacy - carefully distinguished from history, Pierre Nora drew on the concept of collective memory as early as 1978. Nora edited his massive, seven-part book *Les lieux de mémoire* between 1984 and 1992. The essay "Entre mémoire et histoire" ("Between Memory and History"), by Nora, closely following Halbwachs, underlines that "memory and history, far from being equivalent, appear now to be in fundamental conflict." This essay serves as the collection's introduction. But unlike Halbwachs, who assumes that collective memories exist, Nora sums up the state of the world today by believing that because there is so little memory left, all talked about it a lot. His attention therefore turns to lieux de mémoire, places sites of recollection. Nora outlines the requirements that an event or object must have in order to be classified as a site of memory in his theoretical prologue to the first book of *Les lieux de mémoire*. He asserts that memory sites can be divided into three categories: material, functional, and symbolic:

a. Material Dimension: In the broadest sense, sites of memory are cultural objectivations. In addition to 'graspable' items like paintings or literature, they also encompass historical events and even memorial minutes of silence because, as Nora argues, "they literally (break) a temporal continuity".

b. Functional Dimension: Such objectivations need to serve a purpose in society. Notable books are initially written for a specific purpose before being transformed into memory locations, such as Ernest Lavisse's *Histoire de France*. *The Histoire de France* served as a textbook and organized the study of history in educational settings. The purpose of the aforementioned minute of quiet is to periodically trigger a recollection.

c. Symbolic Dimension: In addition to serving a purpose, the objectivation must also have symbolic significance. This is the case, for instance, when acts are transformed into rituals or when locations are enveloped in "symbolic auras". The purposeful symbolic signification is what initially turns a cultural item into a place of memory, whether it is attributed to objectivation at the time of production or not.

According to Rigney who views the *lieu de mémoire* as basically a mnemonic process rather than a fixed thing, sites of memory are continually being reinvested with new meaning and become a self-perpetuating vortex of symbolic investment as a result. In response to what she calls a “shift from ‘sites’ to ‘dynamics’ within memory studies, [which] runs parallel to a larger shift of attention within cultural studies from products to processes, from a focus on cultural artefacts to an interest in how those artefacts circulate and influence their environment, she promotes the study of *lieux de mémoire*.

Therefore, it can be claimed that while if Nora's *lieu de mémoire* is undoubtedly the most well-known and commonly used approach to cultural recollection on a global scale, it also represents one of the most glaringly under-theorized notions of memory studies. Additionally, it carries with it some antiquated and ideologically motivated presumptions about the nature of memory, history, and the nation, which memory studies had better shed if it wants to benefit from the tremendous inspiration provided by the concept of the *lieu de mémoire* in order to investigate the increasingly globalising processes and constellations of cultural memory.

4. Aleida and Jan Assmann: The Cultural Memory:

The most influential method of memory research in the German-speaking world has been the “Culture Memory” theory, which Aleida and Jan Assmann first proposed at the end of the 1980s. When referring explicitly to the Assmanns' concept, the phrase “Cultural Memory” is capitalized to set it apart from a more general application. One of its main accomplishments is the systematic, conceptually complex, and theoretically solid way in which it describes the relationship between culture and memory. The Assmanns' theory makes it possible to deal with a variety of issues that have been of increasing interest in the humanities and social sciences since the 1980s, particularly through its emphasis on the interdependences among cultural memory, collective identity, and political legitimation. History, anthropology, archaeology, religious studies, media theory, literary studies, and sociology are just a few of the different academic disciplines that have come together under one roof as a result of the notion of cultural memory to create a common area of study.

a. Communicative Memory and Cultural Memory:

The distinction between two registers of Halbwachs' collective memory serves as the foundation for the idea of cultural memory. Jan and Aleida Assmann's theory is based on the realization that there is a qualitative difference between a collective memory that is based on forms of regular interaction and communication and a collective memory that is more institutionalized and rests on rituals and media. This concept is in many ways influenced by Halbwachs's findings. As a result, they make a distinction between two “memory frameworks”: communicative memory and cultural memory. In order to demonstrate how fundamentally different, the contents, forms, media, temporal structure, and bearers of these two memory frameworks are from one another, Jan Assmann draws a sharp contrast between communicative memory and cultural memory features.

i. Communicative Memory is created by everyday interaction; it only ever pertains to a small, fluctuating temporal range of roughly 80–100 years and contains the historical experiences of

contemporaries. The information in communicative memory can be altered and does not necessarily have a predetermined meaning. Everyone is viewed as equally capable within this framework of remembering and comprehending the shared history. According to Jan Assmann, the study of oral history includes communicative memory. To better distinguish the topic of Cultural Memory, which is the actual subject of their research, the Assmanns utilise communicative memory as a contrast phrase.

ii. A memory connected to material objectifications is a Cultural Memory. It has been intentionally developed and ritualized. While communicative memory is linked to the “temporal dimension of everyday life,” remembering within the context of cultural memory takes place in what Jan Assmann refers to as the “temporal dimension of the festival.” Cultural Memory transmits a predetermined set of meanings and contents that are preserved and interpreted by qualified experts (for example, priests, shamans, or archivists). Mythical occurrences from a long ago that are seen as being fundamental to the community are at the centre of it (for example, the exodus from Egypt or the Trojan War). So, there is a huge difference between the period remembered inside the communicative memory framework and that remembered in the cultural memory, or, to use the term developed by anthropologist Jan Vansina, a dynamic “floating gap” that shifts with the passage of time.

Jan Assmann first used the term “Cultural Memory” in an essay titled “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” which was published in German in 1988 and in English in 1995. He provided the following definition: “The concept of cultural memory comprises that body of reusable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch, whose ‘cultivation’ serves to stabilize and convey that society’s self- image. Upon such collective knowledge, for the most part (but not exclusively) of the past, each group bases its awareness of unity and particularity.” (Erl, *Memory in Culture* 29).

b. Cultural Memory, Writing, and Political Identity:

The most significant work on Cultural Memory Studies in Germany is still considered as Jan Assmann's *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, which was published in 1992. In it, Assmann discusses the connections between memory, the construction of social identity, and the exercise of political power, as well as the differences and similarities between oral and written cultures. Jan Assmann highlights that societies conceive their self-images and sustain an identity over the course of generations through establishing a culture of remembering, and they do this in fundamentally different ways. By developing a typology of cultures, he hopes to demonstrate these distinctions in societies’ “connective structures,” which are structures that unite past and present with other social groups through acts of remembrance. The early eastern and western civilizations of Egypt, Israel, the Hittites, and Greece are used as examples by Egyptologist Assmann.

Literacy and Orality are the two primary forms of Cultural Memory. According to Assmann, literate cultures have textual coherence while oral civilizations have ritual coherence.

Because the Cultural Memory is maintained in the biological memories of the singers or shamans and any modification could jeopardise the tradition, oral cultures depend on the generally precise recital of their narratives. On the other side, textual coherence depends on the outsourcing of cultural meaning into the literary medium. It is conceivable to send more information by such medial externalization than the person is able to retain in memory. Yet, following generations must re-appropriate the mandatory, canonical writings of Cultural Memory. Their intent must be explained and interpreted: Hence, textual coherence is closely related to cultural processes like commentary, imitation, and critique.

The foundation of the cultural memory is made up of “myths,” or tales about a shared past that provide direction in the present and encouragement for the future. These tales may contain elements of a mythical or absolute past, as in the case of ancient Egyptian civilization, or they may deal with a relative past, such as history, as in the case of ancient Israel. The myths of the Cultural Memory serve a particular purpose, whether or whether they are based on fact or fiction: The definition of myth is a story one tells oneself to orient oneself in the universe; [it is] a truth of a higher order, which is not only true but also makes normative claims and has a formative force. Myths frequently display a foundational dynamic as well as a counter-present dynamic. Because the myth is viewed by society as a reflection of a shared history that gives rise to current conditions, it serves as the foundation for and justifies existing systems. If the myth helps to contrast a “deficient present” with the memory of a bygone, better era, however, it can also take on a contra-present and possibly delegitimizing meaning.

The case studies in *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*’ second section demonstrate the tight connections between writing, cultural memory, and political identity. In literate civilizations, normative and formative texts develop and perpetuate shared, identity-forming cultural meaning. According to Assmann normative writings formalise social behaviour rules. The group's self-image and the knowledge that upholds their identity are formed via formative texts. The former responds to the query ‘what should we do?’ whereas the latter addresses ‘who are we?’” Such books help to foster the ethnogenesis, or birth of a culture, in Greece, Palestine, and Egypt, and they serve as the foundation for religious memory as resistance there.

c. Functional Memory and Stored Memory:

Assmann further distinguishes between functional and stored memory to explain how the Cultural Memory's contents are activated and deactivated (or: working and archival memory). The “inhabited memory” is the functional memory. It is made up of “meaningful elements” that can be put together to make a whole tale. The traits of functional memory include “relevance to a group, selectivity, its relation to shared ideals, and a direction towards the future.” In contrast, the stored memory is the “uninhabited memory,” “an amorphous mass” of disconnected, “neutral elements,” which do not show any “vital relationship” to the present.

Collectively, the stored memory includes information that is no longer useful, foreign, or identity-specific as well as information about missed opportunities, other possibilities, and unutilized chances. Contrarily, the functional memory is an acquired memory that results from the

act of selecting, relating, and creating meaning. Unstructured, unconnected pieces are composed, constructed, and connected when they enter the functional memory. This productive effort generates meaning, which the recorded memory inherently lacks. Perspective is how Aleida Assmann refers to the connection between these two cultural memory domains. The stored memory should be considered as the background, with the functional memory appearing in the foreground as a silhouette.

The stored memory is just as crucial as the functioning memory when it comes to carrying out critical functions like identity building or legitimizing an already-existing social structure. It functions as a “reservoir for future useful memories,” a “resource for the replenishment of cultural know-how,” and consequently, as a “condition for the possibility of cultural change.” Should they take on a new layer of significance for society, stored memory elements may transform into functional memory. The elements of the stored memory may transform into the functional memory if they come to have an additional layer of social significance. The degree of permeability between the two domains of cultural memory, which affects the likelihood of change and renewal, is therefore just as important as the content of each area.

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