

## THE ROLE OF MEMORY IN SHAPING COLLECTIVE CULTURAL HERITAGE

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**Abstract:** This article examines the central role of memory in shaping collective cultural heritage, emphasizing its function as both a preservative and transformative force in the construction of communal identities. Memory is presented not as a passive archive but as an active and selective process through which societies commemorate, reinterpret, and transmit traditions across generations. The study explores how oral traditions, material culture, performance, and commemorative practices embody memory and sustain cultural continuity, while also adapting to changing social contexts. It highlights the interplay between remembering and forgetting, the politics of memory in heritage curation, and the ways communities confront trauma and loss through acts of cultural remembrance. Special attention is given to the impact of globalization and digital technologies, which extend the reach of memory while introducing new challenges of authenticity and ownership. Ultimately, the article argues that memory is indispensable for the vitality of cultural heritage, enabling it to function as a living, dynamic resource that connects the past to present realities and future aspirations.

**Keywords:** Collective memory, Cultural heritage, Oral traditions, Commemoration and identity, Digital memory, Heritage and transformation

Memory has long been recognized as one of the fundamental forces in shaping the identity of individuals and communities. It not only preserves the traces of the past but also actively participates in the construction of cultural meanings that extend into the present and inform the future. When viewed in the context of cultural heritage, memory becomes more than a repository of recollections. It is a dynamic and creative process through which societies interpret their histories, negotiate their identities, and transmit values across generations. Cultural heritage, whether manifested in tangible forms such as monuments, artifacts, and architecture, or intangible practices such as rituals, music, storytelling, and performance, is deeply rooted in collective memory. It is through memory that cultural heritage gains resonance, legitimacy, and continuity, and it is through the act of remembering that communities affirm their sense of belonging and shared identity.

The role of memory in shaping cultural heritage is evident in the ways societies commemorate significant events, figures, and traditions. Commemoration is not merely a neutral act of preserving facts about the past but a selective process that highlights certain aspects while overlooking others. In this selectivity, memory functions as both a cultural filter and a creative act. The narratives that communities choose to remember become the foundation of their cultural heritage, while those that are forgotten or marginalized shape the silences within collective identity. In this sense, memory is always entangled with power, authority, and ideology, since decisions about what to remember and what to forget often reflect broader social, political, or cultural agendas. Heritage, therefore, is not a fixed archive but a living field of memory that is constantly reconstructed in response to the present.

The interplay between memory and cultural heritage is particularly evident in oral traditions. Storytelling, epic poetry, song, and ritual transmission are modes of remembering that have sustained cultural continuity for centuries. Communities that may not have relied on written records have preserved their histories and identities through the collective act of remembering. Oral traditions are never simply static repetitions; they adapt to new contexts, reinterpret meanings, and incorporate contemporary concerns. Each performance of a traditional song or story is both an act of remembrance and a renewal of heritage. Memory here functions as a bridge between past and present, ensuring that cultural heritage remains vital and relevant while affirming communal bonds.

The role of memory in shaping heritage can also be observed in the material culture of societies. Monuments, architecture, sacred sites, and artifacts are physical embodiments of memory, anchoring collective identity in specific places and objects. These sites and objects acquire meaning not merely through their material existence but through the memories attached to them by communities. A building may stand for centuries, but it is the stories told about it, the rituals performed around it, and the emotional attachments invested in it that transform it into heritage. When such monuments are destroyed - whether by natural disaster, war, or deliberate acts of erasure - it is not only material loss that communities experience but also an assault on their collective memory. The rebuilding or preservation of such sites often becomes a powerful act of cultural resilience, a way of affirming memory and asserting the continuity of heritage against forces of disruption.

The politics of memory also play a crucial role in the shaping of cultural heritage. Nations, institutions, and communities construct official narratives of memory that frame how heritage is presented and understood. Museums, archives, and cultural institutions curate heritage through the selection and interpretation of objects, documents, and stories. This process inevitably involves decisions about inclusion and exclusion, often privileging dominant narratives while marginalizing others. The result is a heritage landscape shaped as much by what is remembered as by what is silenced. However, in recent decades there has been a growing recognition of the need to democratize memory and heritage, giving voice to marginalized groups whose histories and cultural contributions have long been overlooked. Memory here becomes an instrument of cultural justice, enabling the reconstruction of heritage in more inclusive and pluralistic ways.

Memory also plays a profound role in the aftermath of collective trauma. Wars, genocides, forced migrations, and other catastrophic events leave deep scars on the memory of communities. The cultural heritage that emerges in such contexts often functions as a form of healing, commemoration, and testimony. Memorials, commemorative rituals, and artistic expressions give shape to painful memories, allowing communities to confront the past while constructing narratives of survival and resilience. Memory in this sense is both burden and resource. It carries the weight of trauma but also provides the means for cultural regeneration. Heritage shaped by traumatic memory embodies not only loss but also the capacity to remember and thereby resist the erasure of identity.

The transmission of memory across generations is another central dimension of its role in cultural heritage. Collective memory depends on the intergenerational sharing of stories, practices, and values. Elders passing down songs, rituals, or craft techniques to younger members of a community ensure that heritage remains a living tradition rather than a static relic. Yet this

process is not mechanical. Younger generations often reinterpret and adapt inherited practices in ways that reflect their own experiences and contexts. In this way, memory ensures continuity while simultaneously accommodating transformation. Heritage is preserved not by freezing it in time but by allowing it to evolve through the dynamic process of remembering and reimagining.

In the contemporary era, new technologies have expanded the possibilities for memory and heritage. Digital archives, virtual reality reconstructions, and online platforms enable communities to document, preserve, and share their cultural heritage in unprecedented ways. These tools allow for the storage and dissemination of memory beyond physical and temporal boundaries, offering new modes of engagement with heritage. At the same time, digital technologies raise questions about authenticity, ownership, and the potential loss of embodied forms of memory that are integral to many traditions. While digital memory expands access, it also risks flattening the lived, performative dimensions of heritage that rely on face-to-face interaction and communal participation. The challenge lies in integrating technological innovation with the preservation of memory's affective and experiential qualities.

Memory also intersects with cultural heritage in the realm of performance. Theater, dance, and music are powerful embodiments of collective memory, translating histories and identities into embodied forms. Performers draw upon memory not only in terms of content - reproducing stories, rituals, and repertoires - but also in terms of technique, transmitting embodied knowledge across generations. In the performance of cultural heritage, memory is enacted, shared, and transformed. Audiences too participate in this process, engaging with performance as a collective act of remembering. Performative heritage highlights the experiential dimension of memory, reminding us that memory is not only cognitive but also embodied, emotional, and sensory.

The role of memory in shaping cultural heritage also highlights the tension between preservation and change. Heritage, by definition, seeks to preserve elements of the past, while memory, as a living process, continually reinterprets them. This tension can lead to debates within communities about how traditions should be maintained, what constitutes authenticity, and how much adaptation is acceptable. For some, fidelity to the past is paramount; for others, innovation is necessary for heritage to remain meaningful. These debates underscore that cultural heritage is not a static set of objects or practices but a contested field in which memory plays a central role. By negotiating between preservation and transformation, memory ensures that heritage remains both rooted and dynamic.

Another crucial dimension is the ethical responsibility of memory in relation to cultural heritage. Forgetting, whether deliberate or accidental, can lead to the loss of valuable cultural practices, languages, or histories. At the same time, excessive fixation on certain memories can risk perpetuating divisions, exclusions, or cycles of trauma. The challenge is to cultivate forms of memory that acknowledge the complexities of history, honor the diversity of cultural contributions, and promote reconciliation and mutual understanding. Cultural heritage shaped by such memory can serve as a resource for building more inclusive and just societies.

In a globalized world marked by migration, mobility, and cultural exchange, memory plays a vital role in sustaining diasporic and transnational identities. Communities dispersed across geographical boundaries often rely on memory to maintain connections to their cultural heritage. Food, language, music, and rituals carried into new contexts become anchors of identity, embodying memories of homeland and ancestry. At the same time, these memories are

reinterpreted in relation to new environments, leading to the creation of hybrid forms of heritage. The role of memory here is not to freeze identity in a distant past but to allow it to adapt and thrive in changing circumstances, weaving together multiple cultural strands into new collective narratives.

In conclusion, the role of memory in shaping collective cultural heritage is both foundational and transformative. Memory is the medium through which heritage is preserved, transmitted, and renewed. It endows heritage with meaning, embedding cultural expressions within narratives of identity, belonging, and continuity. It also ensures that heritage is not static but responsive, adapting to new contexts, technologies, and social realities. Through memory, communities confront both the burdens and the possibilities of the past, forging cultural heritages that sustain them in the present and orient them toward the future. The dynamic relationship between memory and heritage underscores that culture is not simply inherited but continuously reimagined through acts of remembering. This process, far from being a passive reflection of history, is an active and creative endeavor that defines who we are collectively and how we choose to carry our past into the future.

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