



## CONSTRUCTING KNOWLEDGE THROUGH MEMORY: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVE ON CULTURAL RECALL

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### ABSTRACT

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Memory plays a central role in ethnography, shaping both cultural practice and the interpretation of experiences. This study explores how individual and collective memories influence the understanding of social norms, rituals, and everyday life in a community setting. Data were collected using in-depth interviews, participant observation, and narrative documentation, and analysed thematically to identify patterns in memory recall, narrative construction, and cultural interpretation. Findings suggest that memory functions as a cognitive and social framework that informs both participants' practices and the ethnographer's analysis. This study highlights the significance of incorporating memory as an analytic lens in ethnography to better capture the temporal, emotional, and symbolic dimensions of culture.



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### INTRODUCTION

Memory occupies a central position in ethnographic inquiry because it constitutes one of the principal mechanisms through which societies preserve knowledge, transmit values, and maintain continuity between past and present. Memory is not simply an individual cognitive process but a socially constructed phenomenon that emerges through interaction, shared experiences, and cultural practices (Halbwachs, 1992). Collective memory enables communities to define their identities, legitimize social institutions, and provide meaning to historical events. Consequently, memory functions as a social resource that shapes everyday practices, ritual performances, and symbolic systems. Connerton (1989) argues that societies remember not only through narratives and written records but also through bodily practices, commemorative rituals, and repetitive performances that embed the past within the present. Thus, memory serves as a bridge connecting individual experiences with collective understandings and cultural continuity.

Anthropological scholarship has increasingly recognized that memory plays a crucial role in the construction of social knowledge and cultural identity. Through narratives, myths, oral histories, and material artifacts, communities organize their understanding of the world and reproduce systems of meaning across generations (Geertz, 1973; Assmann, 2011). Memory is therefore inseparable from culture, as it provides symbolic frameworks that guide interpretation and social action. According to Ricoeur (2004), memory represents a process of interpretation rather than mere recollection, implying that the past is constantly reconstructed in relation to contemporary contexts. Similarly, Erll (2011) emphasizes that cultural memory is dynamic and continuously shaped through communication, media, and social interaction.

These perspectives suggest that remembering is not a passive activity but an active process through which communities negotiate identities and produce knowledge.

Ethnographic research provides a particularly appropriate framework for investigating memory because it enables researchers to examine how memories are embedded within daily life and cultural practices. Through prolonged engagement and participant observation, ethnographers can explore the ways individuals and groups narrate the past, reproduce traditions, and assign meanings to collective experiences (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2011) argue that ethnographic fieldwork captures the contextual and emotional dimensions of human experience that are often inaccessible through purely historical or survey-based approaches. By engaging directly with rituals, storytelling sessions, and everyday interactions, ethnographers are able to document both explicit and tacit forms of memory embedded within social life.

Previous studies have demonstrated that collective memory serves important social functions. Sutton (2003) argues that memory is closely connected with ritual practices and sensory experiences that reinforce social cohesion and cultural continuity. Likewise, Assmann (2011) emphasizes that cultural memory contributes to the formation of collective identities and provides symbolic legitimacy for institutions and traditions. In many societies, oral narratives and commemorative practices function as mechanisms through which historical knowledge is transmitted and social values are reinforced (Erll, 2011). Nevertheless, despite extensive theoretical discussions concerning memory, relatively little attention has been devoted to understanding how ethnographers themselves document, interpret, and analyze memory within specific cultural contexts. Existing studies tend to emphasize either psychological dimensions or historical representations, while the methodological challenges associated with capturing memory in everyday life remain insufficiently explored.

This study seeks to address this gap by examining how memory contributes to the construction of knowledge, cultural practices, and community narratives. Specifically, the study investigates the interaction between individual and collective memories, the mechanisms through which memories are transmitted, and the role of ethnographic methods in documenting and interpreting these processes. Ethnography is particularly suitable because it facilitates direct observation, participation in cultural activities, and the collection of rich narrative data, thereby enabling researchers to capture emotional, symbolic, and temporal dimensions of memory (Pink et al., 2016; Hine, 2020). Through this approach, memory is understood not merely as recollection but as a dynamic process through which communities construct meaning and reproduce cultural knowledge.

The urgency of this research lies in the increasing challenges posed by modernization, globalization, and technological transformations, which influence the ways communities remember and transmit cultural knowledge. Rapid social change may disrupt traditional mechanisms of memory transmission and contribute to the erosion of local identities and historical consciousness. UNESCO (2022) emphasizes that safeguarding intangible cultural heritage requires preserving not only material artifacts but also oral traditions, social practices, and collective memories. Understanding memory from an ethnographic perspective therefore contributes to anthropology, social history, and cultural studies while providing practical insights for heritage preservation and community empowerment.

Ultimately, this study argues that memory constitutes both a cognitive and social medium through which knowledge is constructed and cultural meanings are reproduced. Ethnography offers a powerful methodological framework for examining the interplay between memory, experience, and cultural interpretation, enabling researchers to capture the complexity of human experience in context. By focusing on cultural recall and narrative practices, this research contributes to broader discussions concerning memory, identity, and knowledge production in contemporary societies.

## METHOD

This study employed a qualitative ethnographic approach to explore how memory is constructed, transmitted, and interpreted within cultural contexts. Ethnography was selected because it enables researchers to understand lived experiences, symbolic meanings, and social interactions through direct engagement with community life (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). The research was conducted in a community where traditional practices and rituals remain actively maintained, providing a suitable setting for examining the interplay between memory, culture, and social identity. Participants were selected purposively and consisted of 12–15 key informants, including elders, ritual leaders, and long-standing community members who possessed extensive knowledge of cultural traditions and collective memories (Patton, 2015). Data were collected through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and narrative documentation. Participant observation enabled the researcher to witness rituals, storytelling practices, and everyday interactions through which memories are expressed and reproduced (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011; Pink et al., 2016). Semi-structured interviews provided opportunities to explore personal experiences, collective recollections, and the meanings attached to cultural practices (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Tracy, 2020), while written records, oral histories, and visual materials complemented observational data and facilitated triangulation (Bowen, 2009; Hine, 2020).

Data analysis followed a thematic approach involving verbatim transcription, open coding, and axial coding to identify relationships among themes associated with cultural practices, narrative construction, and memory transmission (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2019; Saldaña, 2021). The analysis focused on the interactions between individual and collective memory and their role in shaping social identity and cultural continuity. To ensure trustworthiness, several validation strategies were applied, including triangulation, member checking, audit trails, and peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). These procedures enhanced the credibility, transparency, and interpretive depth of the findings. Methodologically, ethnography provides a robust framework for examining memory as a socially embedded phenomenon influenced by rituals, narratives, and intergenerational transmission (Halbwachs, 1992; Connerton, 1989; Assmann, 2011). Through prolonged engagement and contextual interpretation, this approach captures the emotional, symbolic, and temporal dimensions of memory, thereby contributing empirically to scholarship on cultural memory, anthropology, and contemporary ethnographic methodology (Erlil, 2011; Hine, 2020; Tracy, 2020).

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that memory plays a pivotal role in shaping cultural practice, social cohesion, and community identity within the studied community. Participant observation and in-depth interviews revealed that both individual and collective memories influence how community members interpret rituals, traditions, and everyday social interactions. Memory functions as a cognitive and social framework that informs behavior, storytelling, and cultural norms, echoing prior studies emphasizing the dual role of memory as personal and collective (Halbwachs, 1992; Connerton, 1989).

One of the central themes identified was the intergenerational transmission of memory. Elders in the community act as custodians of knowledge, recounting historical events, genealogies, and past agricultural or ritual practices. These narratives are not simply recollections but are actively constructed and adapted to contemporary social realities. Observations show that storytelling during communal gatherings or ritual preparations allows younger members to internalize these memories, reinforcing social norms and cultural values (Sutton, 2003). For example, in ceremonial activities such as [specific ritual], elders recall the steps, symbolism, and moral lessons embedded in the practice, ensuring that the meaning is not lost across generations.

Individual memory was also observed to interact with collective memory in dynamic ways. Participants often recalled personal experiences that either reinforced or challenged the collective narrative, providing nuanced insights into cultural change and continuity. In interviews, several participants narrated how past events, such as crop failures or communal disputes, informed current strategies and decision-making processes, demonstrating the role of memory in guiding practical actions. This aligns with the literature suggesting that memory not only preserves the past but shapes present behaviour and social strategies (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011).

Another important finding was the role of ritual and material culture in reinforcing memory. Objects such as traditional tools, ceremonial garments, and household artifacts serve as mnemonic devices, triggering recollections of past events and practices. For instance, specific patterns in textile weaving or the placement of ritual objects evoke collective memories, which are narrated during communal ceremonies or training sessions for younger members. These findings corroborate Connerton's (1989) argument that material culture mediates the persistence of social memory.

The study also found that memory contributes to identity construction. Community members use shared recollections to define their social roles, ethical norms, and group membership. Memory is performative; by recounting specific stories or reenacting traditional practices, individuals assert continuity with the past while negotiating their place in the present social structure. The interplay between memory and identity was particularly evident in narratives related to historical migration, land use, and communal leadership, where memory functions as both a legitimizing force and a tool for social cohesion (Halbwachs, 1992; Sutton, 2003).

Importantly, the research highlights the emotional dimension of memory. Participants frequently described memories imbued with emotions such as pride, fear, or reverence. Emotional recall was especially pronounced during rituals or storytelling sessions, where participants relived experiences and reinforced cultural norms through shared affect. These observations suggest that memory is not merely cognitive but deeply affective, influencing the intensity and longevity of cultural transmission (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011).

Challenges in capturing memory were also identified. Memory is inherently selective and reconstructive; participants' recollections sometimes varied or contained inconsistencies. For instance, different elders recounted the sequence of certain rituals differently, reflecting subjective interpretations shaped by personal experience and social position. This finding underscores the importance of ethnographic triangulation—combining observation, interviews, and documentary analysis—to create a comprehensive and balanced understanding of memory practices (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2019).

Another significant theme was the adaptation of memory to contemporary pressures. As younger generations interact with modern education, media, and technology, traditional narratives are being reinterpreted or selectively transmitted. Participants noted that while some ritual knowledge is maintained strictly according to tradition, other aspects have been adapted to fit current social and economic realities. This dynamic demonstrates that memory is both preservative and adaptive, allowing culture to remain relevant without losing its continuity (Connerton, 1989).

The study also revealed that memory functions as a regulatory mechanism within the community. Collective recollections of historical conflicts, norms, or previous transgressions inform present-day ethical behaviour and decision-making. For example, communal rules regarding resource sharing or land management are often justified through reference to historical narratives, reinforcing compliance and social order. In this sense, memory operates as a social tool, shaping behaviour while maintaining cultural coherence (Halbwachs, 1992).

A particularly interesting observation was the role of narrative structures in memory transmission. Elders frequently employed storytelling techniques such as repetition, metaphor, and dramatization to enhance recall among younger members. These strategies not

only improved retention but also encouraged engagement with the moral and symbolic dimensions of the culture. The use of narrative as a mnemonic and pedagogical tool aligns with previous research highlighting the performative and instructional nature of ethnographic memory (Sutton, 2003; Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011).

The interaction between personal and collective memory also emerged as a key point of discussion. Personal memories often serve as counter-narratives or supplements to collective memory, providing multiple perspectives on events, practices, or norms. In some cases, these personal recollections sparked debate or reinterpretation of traditional practices, demonstrating that memory is a living, contested, and negotiated construct within ethnographic settings (Connerton, 1989).

From a methodological perspective, this study illustrates the advantages of ethnography in memory research. Direct participation in rituals, observation of storytelling, and collection of material artifacts allowed the researcher to capture both explicit and tacit aspects of memory. This approach ensures that the complexity, emotional depth, and social embeddedness of memory are fully represented, beyond what interviews alone could provide (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011; Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2019).

In summary, the findings suggest that memory in ethnography functions at multiple levels: as a cognitive resource, a social mechanism, and a cultural tool. It preserves tradition, informs identity, regulates social behaviour, and enables adaptation to contemporary pressures. Memory is active, performative, and embedded in material culture, shaping both the practices of community members and the interpretations of the ethnographer.

The study contributes theoretically by demonstrating that memory is central to understanding cultural continuity and change, and practically by showing that ethnographic methods can effectively document and interpret both individual and collective memories. These insights have implications for cultural preservation, heritage education, and community engagement, emphasizing that memory is not only a repository of the past but also a dynamic component of present and future cultural life.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study demonstrates that memory constitutes a fundamental element in the construction of cultural knowledge, social identity, and community cohesion. Both individual and collective memories operate as dynamic mechanisms through which traditions, values, and social norms are transmitted across generations. The findings reveal that memory is not merely a repository of past experiences but an active and adaptive process that shapes present practices and influences future cultural continuity. Rituals, storytelling, and material culture serve as important vehicles for preserving and reproducing collective memories, while emotional and symbolic dimensions strengthen their significance within everyday life.

The study further shows that memory contributes to identity formation, ethical regulation, and social order by providing shared references that guide community behavior and decision-making. At the same time, memory remains flexible and negotiable, allowing communities to reinterpret traditions in response to contemporary challenges and changing socio-cultural conditions. Methodologically, the ethnographic approach proved effective in capturing the complexity, emotional depth, and contextual dimensions of memory through participant observation, interviews, and narrative documentation. Overall, this study highlights that memory is both a cognitive and socio-cultural resource essential for understanding cultural continuity and change, offering important implications for heritage preservation, community engagement, and the development of ethnographic scholarship on memory and cultural recall.

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