

Oral Tradition

1. Oral traditions are narratives, songs, chants, poems, genealogies that are passed from generation to generation. The narratives reveal ancient customs, actions, ways of thinking, attitudes, values and beliefs. Oral traditions is the umbrella term. Our genres are examples of oral traditions. When writing was introduced in the last 200 years, many of these were recorded, and modern people continue writing using the genres resulting in modern themes and modern ideas, even using English to express oral traditions. E.g. there are old poems and songs, and now there are new poems and songs where the subject matter shifts to themes that are typical of today.
2. Because there was no writing, generations depended on memory and transmitted what they remembered from previous generations. Folk memory is collective memory as opposed to what each person recalls. Myths and legends are remembered collectively as narratives. Eg of folk memory – homeland of Maori is Hawaiki. Paradise of Tongans and Samoans is Pulumotu. Part of our indigenous knowledge.

In modern research, it turns out the word Hawaiki comes from Sau 'Ariki 'the ancient rulers'. In Tongic, Hau 'Aiki 'the chiefly classes' (in Tongan now hou'eiki). In Maori became Hauaiki -> now pronounced and spelled Hawaiki. Use of linguistics and oral traditions to find meaning of Hawaiki.

Also, it turns out through the use of linguistics and oral traditions that Western Polynesian Pulumotu is in Fiji.

3. The gods that existed in oral tradition had a system of taboo (tapu). This was indigenous law and order. People were not allowed to eat turtle meat at certain times, or it was tapu to touch your father's head, and so on. This system of taboos served to protect man and the environment and also certain classes e.g. chiefly classes.
4. In Samoa, Fiji and Tonga, knowledge of ancestors (genealogies) started and established in the mythologies the gods and chiefly lines. This is reflected in the social organisation today. E.g. Gods, kings, and chiefs were at the top of the social pyramid, and the people without titles or rank were at the base of the hierarchy. In Samoa we have the matai consisting of the ali'i and tūlāfale, then the taule'ale'a, young men without titles at the bottom and ordinary people without chiefly connections.

Tongan and Samoan social pyramids



5. Oral traditions tell about history before contact. E.g. Tonga – the entire chapter tells about the time before writing was introduced, that is, before the coming of Europeans into the Pacific. We learn from the myths and legends the three lines of kings – Tu'i Tonga, Tu'i Ha'atakalaua and Tu'i Kanokupolu.

6. The myth of 'Aho'eitu tells the beginning of kingship in Tonga. They relate the past to the present. E.g. the last section of the chapter gives the relationship between the current chiefly lines in Tonga with the mythical beginning of 'Aho'eitu.
7. Oral traditions also show relationships between Samoa and Tonga and Fiji.
8. Oral traditions have symbolism – one thing symbolises another. Myth illustrates and sets forth models of correct behaviour, constructive values, ethics and morality. Female characters in Samoan myths can be interpreted as either Creative or Destructive. Sina symbolises the moon, a female as opposed to a male (legend of Sina and the eel – origin of the coconut tree), also nurturing, industry, and light or moonlight. Also, productiveness as shown in the productive coconut plant. There cannot be love between Sina and the eel, so it is only achieved when the eel changes to a coconut, so every time Sina drinks a coconut she is kissing his face.

Fāgogo / Fananga – fables or folk tales, even fairy tales.

Look at examples of fāgogo and fananga (handouts)

Difference between myths and legends and folktales

Folktales (fāgogo and fananga) are more for entertainment than history. Myths and legends include tales of origin which are said to be “historical”. Myths can be i) validatory – they exist to validate or justify a particular way of life, e.g. the kava myth in Tongan (check out YouTube) – the seating. Also 'Aho'eitu myth justifies who is king and who serves. Or ii) speculative or problem-reflecting e.g. myth of Maui and Hinenuitepō. iii) or purely for entertainment – these myths are often like folktales. They also have lessons or morals, but they can be fantastic, surreal, magical characteristics.

Samoa and Tongan oral tradition offers a phenomenal array of narratives that form the earliest frameworks of meaning regarding both cosmic and human worlds. We can interpret the narratives. What do they tell us about our cultures today?

To be confirmed – the questions below are indicative only

Assessment 1

PAC 312 Choose a tale of creation and draw a family tree showing the names of the original parents and their descendents and translate the names into English.

PAC 212 Choose a folktale and write about examples of morals or indigenous knowledge we can learn from it.

Essay (40%)

PAC 212 What do we learn about Samoan / Tongan / Fijian indigenous society from the tales of creation and folktales?

PAC 312 Choose two genres (e.g. folk tales, tales of origin) and compare and contrast them as they are represented in Tonga, Samoa or Fiji.