



# Oral Culture - Bridge between Past and Future

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The overall goal of this project was to help the young generation of Europeans to take stock, get to know, and take ownership of their own rich cultural values and expressions as well those of other European countries. In relation to these goals, what the work done by the association permitted was an artisanal reconstruction of lines (in the form of cultural expressions) that cut across national boundaries. These lines indicate clearly that underlying the foundation of the European project there is a stream of concurring commonalities from which we can understand each other (beyond and above everything and anything that may divide us). Thanks to this,



this association aimed at making explicit the commonalities (metaphorically described as building bridges) between our cultures (Turkey, Spain, Germany and Austria) in the knowing that this cannot but rendering a stronger Europe that learns from each other develops understanding and never forgets its own past.

The work carried out in the context of the implementation of the project raised many questions regarding the phenomenon of oral culture. In this publication, we attempt to reflect upon it concentrating in two of its main expressions, namely proverbs and everyday sayings.

## A few introductory notes on the Phenomenon of Oral Culture

Eduardo Feldman Sapir

If we look at the world we live in from the point of view of humanity as a whole, culture is an element that creates separation between human beings. Operating also on the basis of a criteria of exclusiveness, like religion and nationality do, culture is yet another key pillar of the world we live in. Based upon ad-hoc (created) criteria of ascription to something that a part of humanity has in common, culture creates invisible edges that separate human beings. By doing so, culture also creates human segments that are seemingly homogeneous — artificial isles of ‘homogeneity’ structured around shared identitarian traits.

The expressions of culture may talk to the specific features of one ‘cultural collective’ (e.g., the French culture, the ‘Catalan’ culture, etc.). This, however, does not have to be the case for every cultural expression. Although the Mona Lisa painted by Leonardo Da Vinci could be said also to be a product of Italian culture during the Renaissance period, it is also true that it



transcends time and space when it captures so magnificently the inner-beauty of women.

Oral culture, in particular, is a form of culture that was historically transmitted by word of mouth or through oral transmission in the context of specific communities that share the use of one language as a means of communication and expression. Even if the correlation is not perfect, and if the phenomenon of oral culture precedes the creation of the modern nation-states, nowadays these language communities tend to overlap with other communities also founded upon the principle of exclusiveness (e.g., nationality). In such a context, oral culture expressions are seen as natural reinforcers of what make a collective distinct. Oral culture is part of the set of elements that structure life in the name of 'tradition' and that also helps to make sense of the present. Through tradition, it brings the past into the present.

We look at oral culture with a distinctly benign eye. This is so for two main reasons. First, it is a reservoir of identity and of wisdom that holds and confirms us somehow. Second, the oral culture expressions we use today have survived the test of time. So, it is reasoned that if they have made it so far and are still around, there must be a reason to it. If on top of this, we find similar expressions across 'cultures' we know that the expression survived both the test of time in more than one culture. In such cases, there is an extra reason to confirm both its validity and value.

Oral culture expressions cover almost every aspect of life in some depth albeit not equally so across the board. In this regard, they remind us that our wisdom on life and our understanding of it, is uneven across its different aspects. They are the reflection of specific human lived experiences and specific human learning on specific matters within a given vital realm. As it is always the case, the quality of the learning, the amount of wisdom and truth in them (something is true if it is equally true for everyone) contained therein varies a great deal. This is important, since we 'consume' specific oral culture



expressions only when we feel that the truth they convey is aligned with the 'consumer's' way of looking at the world and its own way of living. Often times, we can find oral culture expressions to say something and then others that say the exact opposite. This means that any consumer of these expressions has to choose out of the available stock of expressions. The one the consumer chooses has to make deep sense to him/her. Otherwise, it is difficult to foresee that anyone would resort to something that doesn't carry value for him/her. So, we choose according to where we are at in our own development as beings. This taints our understanding of what is of value and what is not. While for some, a piece may be revelatory and helpful, for another it may not be necessarily so.

Oral culture permeates our expression. Yet, the particular expressions we use are not just anyone. Since they are expressions whose wisdom has to be in sync with our wisdom, through the study of the use of oral cultural expressions we can learn about people's livingness and how they use language to socially help to construct the present and the future.

## Re-assessing Proverbs and Everyday Sayings: A Short Balancing Exercise

Eduardo Feldman Sapir

Proverbs and everyday sayings are usually treasured because of the wisdom they contain and the learnings we may derive from them. However, when we look at them from a bigger perspective, the picture that emerges is a more balanced one; a picture that includes also some more negative elements.

Proverbs and everyday sayings are a reminder of the idiosyncratic and separative character of our cultures. Yet, the fact that we can find the same or equivalent proverbs across languages is also a clear proof of the universality of human beings.

Proverbs and everyday sayings capture a PART of the social dynamics our life is immersed in and bring light into both positive and negative aspects of social life. They are also relevant to our daily living since they are part of the mainstream social coordinates we align to. As such, they facilitate our walking through life. Yet, on the negative side, proverbs helps us to normalise (that is, to accept as normal) some dynamics and social coordinates of how things work that are not necessarily right.



Proverbs and everyday sayings are reminders that there some things that do not change through time. This could be read in two ways: on the one hand, the fact that we are still using proverbs coined many years ago to describe some dynamics that were and still are true show that we are not evolving as a human race. On the other one, they capture things in a ‘true way.’ Since they reflect ‘true,’ we may conclude that they will be always valid. Yet, in relationship with proverbs, everyday sayings and truth, it is important to state clearly that while they may point to accepted truths, not all that is true has its own proverb. Proverbs, therefore, are only partial reflections of what we accept as true. Thus, as we may accept them as good reflectors, we also have to be reminded that there are entire social dynamics that has existed and continue to exist that are not captured by proverbs.

It is good to remember that not all the proverbs and everyday sayings that were coined and used to capture extremely relevant aspects of life in the past are used in the present. One key reason for this, is that some were wiped out from this world by force (e.g., those linked to witchcraft and many others that were brutally eliminated by the Inquisition led by the Catholic Church). This shows us two important things: first, oral culture expressions are subject to the vicissitudes of history; second, that not all that was considered truth at the popular level (and that may well have had their own proverbs and everyday sayings) and was brutally challenged as reflectors of truth is what today we consider true. History is a cemetery of wisdom. How much real wisdom got lost? What kind of

wisdom got lost? Is the new ‘hegemonic’ wisdom necessarily better than the ‘old’ one that was wiped out by force? One could say that wisdom is wisdom so, it does not matter when was coined and under what circumstances. But, is this really so? What about the communities that were able to construct the complex of Göbekli Tepe in Turkey some 14000 years ago or the Pyramids in Egypt? Can we say that, hypothetically, the level of wisdom of these people was superior to ours? Where are the pieces of wisdom coming from those that were involved in the construction of both sites? What if the proverbs and everyday sayings that there are currently available are only those that were able to survive the avatars of history?

The proverbs and everyday sayings that are available to us do not enlighten us regarding of the way forward. They are great navigation tools for those that act within the limits of social life as we know it.

## Gender Stereotypes in Oral Culture

Rachel Andras

*"A written account can be open to multiple interpretations, distortions, and transformations, depending on the time and situation, economic imperatives, or the whims of political or religious leaders. Orally transmitted traditions, in contrast, must be rigorously and accurately passed on in order to survive in all their subtlety, and in the smallest of details."<sup>1</sup>*

Oral culture is transmitted by word of mouth, through oral transmission. Generally speaking, oral traditions have been far more faithfully passed on through time than the written word as it was not only a word that was transmitted, but a way of living. Nothing could be preached or dogmatized because it was passed on through what was truly lived. It was an

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.historyofinformation.com/narrative/oral-to-written-culture.php> 30.04.2015

understanding of how people lived and therefore captured a way of living, not a definition.

We live in societies that have certain ideals and belief systems around masculine and feminine identities. Every man and every woman lives multiple roles on a daily basis conforming to the expectations society places upon them. These roles, which are culturally constructed, provide us with symbols and ideas out of which we construct a sense of what is real. This is what we then live in the manifestation of those roles as daughters and sons, mothers and fathers, wives and husbands, professionals, young and older women and men, etc. If through oral culture we share a way of living, it is not hard to see that its main expressions (proverbs, aphorisms, anecdotes and everyday sayings) play crucial roles in the transmissions of patterns, behaviors and images of what is desirable that support such a way of living. Although oral culture may be a truthful sharing of a way of living, by no means, truth (as defined in the introductory comments) has to be part of a way of living though. This fact is clearly reflected by the amount of stereotypes that are present in the oral culture expressions that reflect ways of living that are reduced versions of what we may call true ones. Thanks to this, stereotypes ended up being part of the social coordinates of the world we live in that we internalize and accept as part of reality.



What are stereotypes? They are types of schemes used for orientation in the social environment to represent the opinions among members of a certain group defined by gender, ethnic origins, nationality, religious beliefs, etc. about another group of people with different social features. As elaborated by Malgorzata Wolska “people organize their knowledge about the world around them by sorting and simplifying received information.”<sup>2</sup> We learn to categorize the world by stereotypes during our upbringing through the observation of certain patterns and behaviors and starting to embody them and

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<sup>2</sup> (<http://krytyka.org/gender-stereotypes-in-mass-media-case-study-analysis-of-the-gender-stereotyping-phenomenon-in-tv-commercials/>)

specifically through the normalization of those patterns and behaviors where, without any reflection or questioning they are adapted and lived. This categorization impedes that we truly connect to each individual member of society as there is a general information pool that is relied on and applied to members of a certain group. Reducing different groups of people to stereotypes pretends that one understands and is able to predict behavior and therefore is in control of social relations. You don't have to connect to each individual and understand who they are and how they are likely to act as this is all contained in the stereotype. "Because of many simplifications and generalizations that they produce, stereotypes present incomplete, subjective and sometimes false images of reality. They are often based on tradition and are resistant to change. Although they can both have positive and negative undertone, the latter is much more common<sup>3</sup> ".

Gender is perhaps the most stereotypical issue reflected in the oral culture tradition. If we look at female-related proverbs they describe a negatively tainted perception of women through various languages and cultures. Language mirrors a social reality and women have been perceived through the ages with mostly negative values. In contemporary use, for example, the words crone, witch and virgin are all negative description of women that transmit that they are evil, threatening or sexually inexperienced. But the meanings were not always the same. "The crone was the old woman whose life experience gave her insight, wisdom and respect and the power to enrich people's lives. The witch was the wise-woman healer, the knower of herbs, the midwife, and the link joining body, soul and temporal life. The virgin was a woman who was unattached, unclaimed and unowned by any man and therefore independent and autonomous."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> (<https://www.msu.edu/course/psy/442/stereotypes.ppt/sld003.htm>) 30.04.2015 and <http://krytyka.org/gender-stereotypes-in-mass-media-case-study-analysis-of-the-gender-stereotyping-phenomenon-in-tv-commercials/> 30.04.2015

<sup>4</sup> Johnston (1997:39)

This shows that, over time, female identity became a very limited version or vision of what it used to be. In line with this, today, known versions of feminine identity recognize her only in the socially assigned roles of being a mother, wife, daughter, etc. that is, in a mere functional and instrumentalized way. Women are hardly honored for themselves as women in their female power and for what they bring to society. Women are always seen in their roles and their social value is attached to those roles as perfectly described in the following proverb: “Single women are gold, married women are silver, widows are copper and old women are tinplate.”<sup>5</sup>

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What stands out about women proverbs is the “fact that the majority of them may be easily understood cross-culturally, even though they originate from all sorts of ‘foreign’ cultures and are characterized by huge cultural differences.”<sup>6</sup> This means they reflect some common characteristics, needs and experiences related to living in male or female bodies and the social roles assigned to them and the way of how they relate to each other. This can be attributed to how life is distributed generally based on the division of labor in many countries. The question to ask here is going deeper in terms of how could any organization of social life bring this absolutely unequal, though universally common treatment of both sexes, where women are degraded, dishonored, robbed of their basic human rights and reduced to their physical reproductive functioning and men are attributed a supposed freedom and power over others that totally disconnects them from who they truly are.

Looking at it from this perspective it seems more that both sexes have lost their equal place in a society where power and privileges over others have become the norm and men and women are aspiring this way of life battling for their appropriate place instead of arresting those ill patterns.

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<sup>5</sup> Cecilia Bohl De Faber: <http://socialphrases.com/quote.php?q=12557> 15.03.2015

<sup>6</sup> Kochman-Haladyj, B. (2012:266)



“What is required from people in all societies is learning to let others be themselves without labels, assumptions or categories”<sup>7</sup> and letting go of identities that force us into roles as wives/husbands, mothers/fathers, etc as an all consuming occupation instead of understanding them as one aspects of our relationship with others.

We are not defined by what we do, but by who we are, and in our beingness we are all equal.

*Instead of getting hard ourselves and trying to compete, women should try and give their best qualities to men — bring them softness, teach them how to cry. -Joan Baez, "Sexism Seen but not Heard," Los Angeles Times, 1974*

## Age and Oral culture – ‘More than a thousand years will pass and many more....’

Elena Vera Gimeo

As is well established, oral culture aims to pass on knowledge and experiences from generation to generation and has proved to be an effective means of communication of certain content, hardly touched by power, money or the Academy. In this way, oral culture manages to preserve values and traditions, which, were they to come through other channels, would not have resisted the passage of time.

However, we shouldn't deny the paradox at the centre of its essence. In this huge cauldron of knowledge rooted in people's daily experiences, cultural and existential ideas persist that go against progress, equality and universal justice. And this is exactly what is happening with stereotypes and the subsequent gender identities they sustain. To paraphrase a famous ‘bolero’,

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<sup>7</sup> Kochman-Haladyj, B. (2012:276)

we could say that these very stereotypes have travelled to us from far, far back in time, through words and images and intend to stay alive in a future, which, let's hope does not last the thousand years that the song foretells.

Our folklore, defined by legends, proverbs, sayings or romances, is full of examples, which transmit and perpetuate a vision of woman as a fragile, dependent and vulnerable being. Our oral culture, rich in messages, which, since ancient times, tried to educate and entertain a poorly informed and varying crowd, attaches a completely different concept of age to women and men. In our 'refranero', the idea of ageing is considered a real disaster, which devalues and belittles women whilst seeing men grow in both wisdom and social recognition, a fact which repeatedly gives them both power and status within the community. So, as time marks and deteriorates the body, men seem to 'mature' and their experiences and knowledge replace the beauty and strength that their ever-vanishing youth washes away. But does the passage of time really make them more valuable and wise compared to women in the same situation? On the contrary, our tales and sayings are full of women who, as they age, lose all that society demands of them, a wonderful body and the innocence of their youth. In this way, that which is defined as experience in men is perceived as danger in women and it is often mocked or rejected.

Older women in oral culture are often depicted as evil stepmothers, witches or mothers in law (let's pause to recognise the complete lack of male counterparts at a certain age) who must be feared or escaped. An old Castilian saying 'a certain Adam, who didn't have a mother in law, is a good example.

Nowadays, sayings are much less effective in promoting values and fostering knowledge; however, advertising which floods our society has taken it upon itself to transmit and perpetuate highly stereotypical visuals when it comes to the ageing process in both women and men.





## **A picture is worth a thousand words**

I am going to focus on another very important aspect of current popular culture which has seen images displace in full the saying, proverb or phrase, It boils down to observing with a critical eye the role which images ‘decorating’ our daily lives exert, whilst simultaneously verifying and contrasting that which has been previously said via the anonymous word.

I am referring to that ‘iconic universe’ which strongly appeals to our feelings and not to our rational mind, which populates our public space or is hung up in our houses and which subliminally reinforces that which was said about both men and women in the olden days. Therefore, this has to be about analysing from a distance, generic representations of human beings and images of ageing engrained in popular culture.

Of course, I am not talking about the image in art, which can be interpreted in so many ways; neither am I talking about the ability to expertly deconstruct, analyse or offer new meanings to a given visual. I am actually talking about all those iconic representations made to transmit a unilateral, one-tracked message in a diverse and multicultural social context; or rather the production and distribution of images absorbed by cultural, political or economic powers and which allow immediate recognition and interpretation.

Given that contemporary society produces, consumes, digests and disperses millions of images per second without leaving any visible mark, I am going to focus on those images, which, in the public space, transmit a powerful message of ‘social power’, which is collectively recognised. Statues which adorn our parks and squares, advertising billboards or bus and metro adverts (none of them showing men or women of a certain age, of course) I am becoming, for all intents and purposes, an observer and I refer to my experience of being a woman well into her sixties who can hardly find any images with which I can identify in modern culture. The examples to which I refer cover a very short period of time, the first twenty days of this

July and do not have much greater relevance than coming from my very own experience.

I am walking through streets and squares of the European city of Athens, the inventor of western democracy (from which women, slaves and children were excluded by the way). As tends to happen when we move in unknown spaces, the images, which populate it, acquire an added value when outside our daily routine. 'They speak' without words of events, values or public recognition and we hear and interpret strange places much more than a foreign language can convey.



I do not want to dwell on the exalting of the young male body which classical Greece defined (multiply reproduced to death in ceramics, t-shirts, post cards and a long list of riff raff for tourists which assault you every which way) I will just stick to talking about 'pro-hombres' defined according to the Royal Academy as an illustrious and respected individual of great importance within his class) which are ever present in central streets and squares. Aged men who were politicians, athletes, strategists, liberators, philosophers, writers represented and recognised publicly occupying a place in society for their contribution to the greater good. And what about women? How have they been represented? Who remembers Safo, Diotime or Aspasia of flesh and bone who contributed with their pen, their word and their intelligence to a civilisation who denied women access to participate in the Olympic games (so they would not see men's naked bodies) or the ability to interpret female roles of their famous tragedies?

Almost at the end of my journey, I stumbled upon a huge advertising billboard, on which an old lady, wrinkled and wearing black (a completely conventional representation of feminine old age) was putting a loaf of bread onto the stove. All these symbols were directly linked to a chain of bakeries claiming to have 'the best bread in Greece', the message being that they always do it with love, dedication and how it should be done.



I return to my city and focus my attention on the public spaces with the greatest visibility and the most visitors, both local and foreign. The same statement; plaques, statues busts of important men (I try to imagine the term ‘promujer’ or important woman or another which may substitute the word ‘homage’ for another more neutral term) And yes, here we also have an overrepresentation of charming old ladies who counteract the witches, mothers in law and other evil women of the same age. You look at them and you feel that they ooze love for their families, that they are the carriers and purveyors of homely values that should never have been lost and are now branded, packaged and sold to those who hark back to a better time.

How can we ignore amongst others ‘Grandmother’s soup’ from Knorr, the pizzas of Tarradellas house, made with such love by that granny who is always waiting for you to come home to the countryside or the recently baked cakes or the menus of ‘Cazuela de la abuela.’ And what about the frankness of “the seamstress grandmother’ who, if any of our young people had any remaining doubts about what a grandmother should be, decorates its shops with a big doll more suited to a children’s fairy tale than a modern business.

A change of heart: distracted, I flick through the Saturday fashion supplement in El Pais (12th of July). As always, the lack of diversity in gender representation, especially that relating to the third age, is evident. A central report in the supplement ‘the verbs which count on the retrograde’ (read the back/ behind) invite us to treat our intimate parts by putting them through intensive surgery for the modest price of a few thousand euros yet warning that it does come with a risk. You must combat the so-called enemy that is age and ‘maintain, replace, eliminate or increase’ according to what our bodies may need.

Check out the details! It is also possible and, of course, desirable, to rejuvenate our vagina.

Finally, a title ‘super heroines against sexualisation’ gives me the hope of finding images which relate more to reality and in which we can recognise middle-aged women. One of the innovations is talking about the launch of a Barbie doll (at 83 years old and still a model, it has become a revolutionary doll, says the footnote), which except for its white hair has the same appearance as a woman 50 years younger. This denial of the passage of time is once again, pathetic. The message that these images convey to women is harrowing. As an important dermatologist takes it upon themselves to mention in an article of the same supplement ‘it is very important to combat any sign of ageing’ in women, of course.

About to succumb under the weight of age and the cruel design that time reserves only to women (it is a well known fact that ‘with age, either you sink or swim’) I find myself facing a comforting image of a 90 year old man calling out from a bus advert ‘every day I am more handsome. I’m not joking’ and ‘oh marvellous’ He has managed it without surgery and without costly beauty treatments, without collateral damage. Only by being consistent with his health and with Campofrio!

Irony aside and all things considered, I finish this article by proposing a critical awareness of all those manifestations of popular culture, be they oral or visual that, seemingly neutral, are a vehicle for the same generic stereotypes as usual. Coming back to the Refranero once again, let us know how to surprise and denounce ‘old wine in new bottles’.

Rachel Andras

## Oral Culture and Health & Medicine

*“The story of the rise of the psychomedical experts – the doctors, the psychologists, and sundry related professionals- has often been told as an allegory of science versus superstition.” “The distinction between*

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<sup>8</sup> Ehrenreich (1999:37)

*“female” superstition and “male” medicine was made final by the very roles of the doctor and the witch at the trial. (...) He owed his new status not to medical or scientific achievements of his own, but to the Church and State he served so well. (...) Witch hunts did not eliminate the lower-class woman healer, but they branded her forever as superstitious and possibly malevolent.”<sup>9</sup>*

Before the emergence of what we call medicine, in Europe, and up to the fifteen and sixteen centuries, people’s wellbeing was in the hands of lay healers. Healing is a very specific activity. It aims at allowing a body to return to its natural harmony by working on the root cause of what is wrong. Healing was a science on its own and was in hands of women.

They were not only able to find a cure for the physical body but they also had the capacity to read peoples’ bodies, faces and hands, to know what was going on and what were the reasons that lead to the dis-ease. Since they could “read” people, they knew what was going on. There was no space for lies, truth was seen.

Hence, there can be no doubt that these women carried an incredible amount of knowledge and wisdom backed by what we can only imagine was an amazing way of living. It is not too farfetched to suspect that in a time where lay people did not write or were able to read written materials that oral communication was the only vehicle for lay people to talk to each other, that there should have been a steady flow of wisdom between healers and the people they treated.

If this is conceivable, there are a few questions begging for answers: where are the proverbs and everyday sayings reflecting these facts? Could it be that what the Inquisition did in relation to healing and healers was far bigger than killing these women they accused of witchcraft as instructed by The Malleus Maleficarum?

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<sup>9</sup> Ehrenreich & English (1999:57)



The development of medicine as part of University curricula in Europe took place under the strict control of the Church. The practice of medicine by university-trained-physicians was also controlled by the Church's iron fist. Soon, medicine initiated a turn into something different: removing symptoms; curing and later prevention. This way of looking at the world, which continue to be hegemonic, resulted into countless proverbs and everyday sayings we still use.

Medicine has gifted us with many incredible developments. Yet, the World Health Organisation has recently reminded us, it has to be about health, which they defined as “the state of complete physical, mental and social wellness, and not just the absence of disease”. This means that for a person to be healthy, the body, mind and the social situation should be in optimal conditions.

This definition is a holistic one. A healthy person has to be healthy on those different aspects otherwise we cannot say that the person is healthy but ill. This definition asks medicine to raise to the challenge of a full blown promotion of health. This is the future we can walk towards. To do so, it may require for medicine to admit that the healing tradition has something to offer. The existence of a host of oral culture expressions linked to healing could have help to make this leap forward. Yet, unfortunately, there is no help from the oral culture front.

As this brief reflection makes clear, the main thrust of the wisdom embodied in oral culture expressions we use today come from a way of looking at health in a reductionist fashion (of course, it does not mean to deny its wisdom and to reject what it has to offer). Hence the wisdom that is available to us is limited. As such, it will not lead us to live in a way so we are healthy as defined by the World Health Organisation. Hence, in matters of health, oral culture does not show the way.

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