

# ORAL TRADITION IN NATIVE AMERICAN AND AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL CULTURE

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## **Abstract**

This article analyses and clarifies concepts and principles of oral tradition in the cultures of Native Americans and Australian Aborigines, their specific perception and application of oral tradition into written form. The aim of this article is to introduce some points from the history, specifics of the oral tradition from the theoretical point of view, and the influence of the Western civilisation on the culture of the indigenous peoples of North America and Australian Aborigines whose cultural heritage is based on the principle of the oral tradition and also influences the face of contemporary literature. These specifics create the space enabling further research with the focus on an analysis by the means of cross-cultural comparative study of individual literary works and their authors, whose original cultures shared colonial supremacy of the European settlers, and were reflected in the literary works of contemporary postmodernist writers relating their origin and literary production with the indigenous peoples of North America or Australia.

**Key Words:** oral tradition, indigenous peoples, Native Americans, Australian Aborigines

## **Abstrakt**

Tento článok analyzuje a približuje pojmy a princípy ústnej tradície v kultúrach pôvodných obyvateľov Ameriky a austrálskych domorodcov, ich špecifické vnímanie a aplikovanie do písomnej tvorby. Cieľom tohto článku je predstaviť niektoré z bodov v histórii, špecifiká ústnej tradície z teoretickej stránky, a vplyv západnej civilizácie na kultúru pôvodných obyvateľov Ameriky a austrálskych domorodcov, ktorých kultúrne dedičstvo sa opiera práve o princíp tradícií ústneho podania a má vplyv aj na súčasťnú tvorbu v oblasti literatúry. Tieto špecifiká vytvárajú ďalší priestor umožňujúci výskum so zameraním na analýzu prostredníctvom medzikultúrnej porovnávacej štúdie jednotlivých literárnych diel a ich autorov, ktorých pôvodné kultúry zdieľali koloniálnu nadvládu európskych osadníkov a boli reflektované v dielach súčasných postmoderných spisovateľov, spájajúcich svoj pôvod a tvorbu s pôvodnými obyvateľmi Ameriky či Austrálie.

**Kľúčové slová:** tradícia ústneho podania, pôvodní obyvatelia, pôvodní obyvatelia Ameriky, austrálski domorodci

## **1 Oral Tradition**

Oral tradition and storytelling represent a crucial part of the all indigenous cultures to an extent that many contemporary writers of indigenous origin after years of silence have been striving to incorporate many key elements of the oral traditional storytelling into their writings not only to preserve them but also to make them understandable for contemporary generation of native and also non-native readers. Employing the instruments of the Western civilisation' literacy in order to present their own view on the indigenous experience as well as on their cultural heritage, but keep on mind the principles of their oral cultures and traditions that had

been previously passed from generation to generation via telling. Even if separated by the miles of land or water, speaking different languages, the indigenous peoples have existed parallelly and adjusted their existence to the environment they lived in, what has reflected into the knowledge mediated in various forms within the community.

The aim of this article is to examine some points and specifics that might be common for the indigenous peoples, such as oral tradition and storytelling, and their forms and representation in traditional cultures, also an influence of the Western civilisation on them, with a main focus on the cultures of Native Americans and Australian Aboriginals. The content of this article includes also a part of my dissertation research focusing on the oral tradition and its use in the works of the contemporary writers of Native American and Australian Aboriginal origin.

Walter Ong in his *Orality and Literacy* (2002) distinguishes few types of orality. An awareness about them brings some light in to better understanding and influence of orality on the shaping not only the indigenous cultures but also those cultures which dominantly took control over them. In case of the *primary orality*, the knowledge of writing is missing, and all the cultural aspects should be preserved through other means, such as memorizing and passing it from one generation to another. "*Speech is a form of sound that shares this common power. Like other sounds, it comes from within a living organism. A text can be ignored; it is just writing on paper. But to ignore speech can be unwise; our basic instincts compel us to pay attention.*" (Ong, 2002, p.32) In case of the *secondary orality* which is "*essentially a more deliberate and self-conscious orality, based permanently on the use of writing and print.*" (Ong, 2002, p. 136) Krupat leans on Ong's theories, as he interrelates some of contemporary Native American writers interested in incorporating the oral traditions into their works, what makes their works distinct from the dominant literary stream. In order to avoid some misinterpretation it is important to be aware of the term *residual orality* and not to confuse it with the previous two. As it relates to expression of words and thoughts in cultures that have been in contact with writing and the processes related to it, yet, they have not incorporated them fully into their notion of reality. In case of postmodernism and the contemporary indigenous writers, their attempt to merge the oral tradition of their cultures and contemporary tradition of dominant Western culture into their works implies a risk that the means of literacy could lead to a decrease of *oral residue*. (McLuhan, 1962)

Many contemporary indigenous critics and writers agree with that to some extent, however, the oral tradition and the storytelling can be considered as an inevitable foundation to "all literatures" (Ramirez p. 1) "*Storytelling is more than entertainment or even the passing on of history and religious beliefs to the next generation,*" as Augsten continues, the storytelling becomes a part of the ceremonial interconnecting the spiritual and the real worlds of the indigenous peoples, that should not exist without each other. For the indigenous cultures, not excepting Australian Aboriginals and Native Americans, the oral tradition and the storytelling is an active act, that Sarris defines as a "*not fixed, but an ongoing process.*" (qrd. in Ramirez p.2)

Hanson's interpretation refers to the Western culture that is in a contrast to the indigenous cultures standing on the opposite site of the scale with their diverse notion of culture as a kind of

system that includes beliefs, history of the land, questions of origin and religion. What she considers to be one of the most obvious differences is the way of preserving of knowledge. With the spread of education and invention of writing and later Gutenberg's printing press during the middle age the Western culture started to prefer the knowledge and sharing it in the printed form. In the past it considered the societies knowledge of which was based, kept and spread on the principles of the oral traditions, to be savage, moreover, without any solid records, so they could not have any history or culture. (2009) Result of such opinions turned into indigenous writings conforming to the Western literary tradition, what in the recent years has met with an open criticism for "*the Western framework and discourse that privileges the textual at the expense of the oral*" (Ramirez, 2002, p.2) and is not working properly in order to present what the oral tradition represents for the indigenous people. The loss of authenticity, misinterpretation of the originally oral literary works is just a top of the iceberg caused during the process of transformation to give the indigenous oral tradition its written form.

In order to overcome such opinions, many researches such as Mihesuah (1996), van Toorn (2000), van Berg (2008), and others from the fields of history, anthropology, sociology and of course literature show that such cultures had their own ways how to preserve their knowledge and traditions for further generations via means that seem to be more complicated, and the oral tradition is one of them not only in the past but also in the contemporary world.

## 2 Who are the Indigenous Peoples

Anaya comes with a precise definition acceptable also for the contemporary world. He links the term *indigenous* to the "*living descendants of preinvasion inhabitants of lands now dominated by others,*" and adds, that "*indigenous peoples, nations, or communities are culturally distinctive groups that find themselves engulfed by settler societies born of the forces of empire and conquest.*" (2004, p.3) The remains of communities of Native Americans, the native inhabitants of the Arctic region, as well as Aboriginals and Maori from the area of Australia and New Zealand or some tribes from the regions in Asia are considered as indigenous, and as the author completes "*they are indigenous because their ancestral roots are imbedded in the lands in which they live, or would like to live, much more deeply than the roots of more powerful sectors of society living on the same lands or in close proximity.*" (Anaya, 2004, p.3)

The indigenous peoples have become the subjects of various researches, as they offer a wide range of topics related to the fields of study, the researchers can work with. Starting with anthropology and archaeology, where the subject of study has become the traces of way of life including the traditions and beliefs of indigenous cultures and the objects they have been using from past till contemporary times. Many researchers are criticised by the indigenous people many of whom are also researchers, as Mihesuah<sup>2</sup> does, whose point of view has been often in a strong

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<sup>2</sup> Mihesuah, Devon A. "*American Indians, Anthropologists, Pothunters, and Repatriation: Ethical, Religious, and Political Differences.*"

contrast as the research means for them more devastation of the cultural heritage rather than a research that might bring some benefit. While many political and social studies have focused on the situation and status of the indigenous peoples in the countries controlled by the dominant non-indigenous population, the growing awareness of the indigenous intelligence has also brought own point of view. The field of literature represents one of the most controversial fields of study, as it is related to the indigenous peoples and their participation in it. The spectrum of present day indigenous literature has a completely different position as it used to have in the previous decades, and also the point of view of the critics on it has changed. Out of many indigenous writers it is important to mention Native Americans and Australian Aboriginals and the onset of writers such as Gerald Vizenor, Leslie Marmon Silko, Alexis Wright or Marie Munkarra, who have brought a new air into the world of literature and space for researches and studies for both camps. The cross-cultural comparative studies of the literary works and their authors, whose original cultures have suffered under suppressing colonial dominance of the European settlers and their culture have a growing tendency not only in the countries such as Australia or The United States, but also in the countries of the previous suppressors at the European continent.

### 3 Oral Culture, Storytelling and the Native American Culture

The history of both Americas has not started with their discovery by Columbus in 1492, but it was much earlier. Porter refers to the traces dating back to “28,000 BCE.” (2005, p.41) Before the Columbus’s arrival, there were supposed to be “*more than three hundred cultural groups and more than two hundred languages in North America.*” (Porter, 2005, p.41) The civilisations from the southern parts of America, the Mayan, the Aztec or the Inca people with their highly developed cultures, had their history recorded in the form of specific pictures, signs or the “quipu<sup>3</sup>” representing a high level form of recording their language and culture, reflecting the dominance over the region. On the other hand, the tribes in the northern parts of the country, whose also unique cultures developed to the maximum the natural environment required and allowed, with some exceptions, basically with no need of recording their languages in order to preserve it for the next generations, for that had been already covered through the storytelling and other forms of the oral traditions necessary to survive in their natural environment. Ong explains, that some primary oral cultures had to find the other way how to preserve and mediate their knowledge, which he does not consider as a process of learning for it is mediated within the primary oral cultures by “*listening, by repeating what they hear, by mastering proverbs and ways of combining and recombining them, by assimilating other formulary materials, by participation in a kind of corporate retrospection*” (Ong, 2002, p.9) On the other hand, Ortiz disagrees, for the

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<sup>3</sup> the device comprises a series of colored cords hanging from a topmost strand. Tied into the pendant cords are a variety of knots that, depending on their type and position, encode various pieces of information, including values from a base-ten numbering scheme. - See more at: <http://50.neh.gov/projects/quipus-inca-language-knots#sthash.y46JTlg4.dpuf>

oral traditions cover more than just repeating, for they include *"the actions, behavior, relationships, practices throughout the whole social, economic, and spiritual life process of the people."* (1992, p.7) [...] *"daily speech, a teaching folklore, ceremony, and religion, a heritage passed on generation to generation in songs, legends, jokes, morality plays, healing rituals, event-histories, social protocol, spiritual rites of passage, and vision journeys to the sacred world,"* (Lincoln, 1985, p.3) that all has become inevitable part of those cultures and emphasized their oral character. Taking that all into account led to acceptance of the brunch of literature, form of which has been based on the oral transmission, therefore, as Lincoln emphasises, it cannot be *"[...] separate from the daily contexts of people's lives,"* as *"[...] the spoken, sung, and danced language binds the people as living text of tribal life."* (1985, p.4)

Nowadays, the population of Native Americans represents only the remains of the previously numerous heterogeneous group of peoples living on the American continent with a rich diversity of original sub-cultures, with own histories and traditions, and of course own languages, for the onset of the Europeans on the American continents meant violation of the previous way of life the natives had been used to. The most powerful nations from Spain, France and England were in a competitive process of colonisation of the New World during the 15th and 16th century. From the beginning the culture of the European countries was considered from, its point of view, to be above the cultures of the indigenous peoples living on the colonised areas. The richness of the natural resources increased the trade and at the same time enabled the spreading of the Christian religion and education, teachings of which were in some cases restricted in their homelands. Using power and some of sophisticated but paradoxically not much humanistic ways to get to the lands and sources previously belonging to the specific native communities, proved the cultural European dominancy of the cultures, heading to series of injustice and harms on the indigenous populations, impact of which has reached even today's society. The justification of such acting was supported by the ideas constructed on the superiority of the European and the Christian civilisation over the pagan civilisations of the Natives. Even though all the countries built their colonial policies often on the religion, the political moods often prevailed and led towards a different treatment of the natives. It was the Christian Spain that started with the using the natives as workers on the building the colonies to create a future colonial empire, where the conditions closely reminded an organisation of work later known as slavery. On the other hand, the policy of France how to colonize the territories and get the peoples living on them under own control, was different. They chose a process, which Porter defines as "Francization" in order to civilize the natives under the French ideas, however, as the author emphasizes the fact that there were many Frenchmen who chose the *"freedom of Indian ways."* (Porter, 2005, p.47)

The Frenchmen soon realized the advantages of the cooperation with the local populations. Adapting to some of the cultural aspects of the natives such as learning their languages and basics of cultural traditions, they recognized the richness of the cultures that had been far from being homogenous. Even though the French policy towards the natives seemed less harmful and aggressive than that the Spanish one, France was also using the means of slavery;

yet, employing more sophisticated ways how to get the populations of the natives under the control grounded in creating a kind of dependency based on the items and alcohol serving for barter. The British kingdom sought after the same things as the other powerful colonial countries. Yet, the impact was influenced by the establishing the settlement colonies that had been supposed to become more permanent settlements, which later turn to establishing the colonial empire, and separation of independent states in the following centuries. The relationship between the British settlers as well as the Americans later, and the native inhabitants was changed during the period of colonising. The arrival of the Puritans, who established the first settlements called “plantations,” structure of which reminded the reservations established in the later history of the U.S.A. The purpose of those plantations was to segregate the natives in order to civilize them by means of Christianity. (Porter, 2005) The relationships between the natives and the British during the 1760s were influenced by the codifications and treaties, which defined the areas that should be inhabited by the natives. The following events in the history of the U.S.A. marked by the wars with France and later the war for independence between the American colonies and the British Empire had a great participation on the treatment of Native Americans in the later periods. The development of the trade between the European continent and the New World just added fuel to the fire as it supported the growth of the negative and threatening factors endangering the indigenous populations and their unique cultures of the New World in a form of exploiting their natural sources and their environments, often resulting into dying out of species of animals, plants and of course the natives because of the diseased the new-comers brought. (Porter, 2005)

For the Europeans who came to the New World, the oral traditions and their concepts were so hard to understand as they were dealing with a completely different awareness of humans and the world they lived in with other beings, Fact that the native communities were living in the various types of environment, influenced their cultures, the way they communicated and shared the knowledge within the own community or those they were neighbouring with, what was sometimes difficult as they spoke different languages. The existence of parallel conditions experience of similar character among the individuals from various tribes caused that such actions served as the sources of remembering and were transformed into quite similar stories and narratives, as for example those of the coyote stories.

According to Porter, the genres belonging to the oral literature can be divided into “*ritual dramas, including chants, ceremonies, and rituals themselves; songs, narratives, and oratory, these sacred and non-sacred storied expressions of language articulate, amongst many other things, Indian understandings of the fundamental truths of creation and the origins of human beings and their relationship to the universe.*” (2005, p.42) The function of the oral literature and the storytellers or the performers was therefore not only to share the knowledge, but also the one of the sourced and means of healing included in ceremonies and sacred rituals that were aimed to re-establish the conditions inevitable for a balance in physical and psychical health. Otherwise, a disruption of the balance might then result in the illness or disorder of the individual or even whole community.

The way Native Americans from north have shared the knowledge of their cultures is defined as oral, for they have been passing the knowledge “*mouth to mouth, age to age, alive on as the people passed on a daily culture,*” (Lincoln, 1985, p.20) in form of myths, legends, rituals, ceremonies, songs and tales. Lincoln emphasises an importance of the oral tradition based on understanding the function of words, for “[...] *words make things happen in Native America; language is the source of a world itself.*” (1985, p.20) Swann encloses importance of the words in the oral language to have almost a ceremonial importance for the native cultures. The power of the connection between the word and the object is enormous as it creates the “‘*event, ’... bringing into this time and place the enduring powers which truly effect that which the events claims, and such action cannot be undone.*” (Krumholz, 1996, p.94) Even though the forms of the oral culture may differ in their length and sometimes even in their specific content, according to the principles of the oral tradition and storytelling characteristic for the Native Americans, such forms are considered as durable and include the possibility of their further re-use. (Ong, 2002)

As it has already been mentioned in the previous paragraphs, the oral tradition and its formats have served as medium for sharing the knowledge related to various aspects of Native American cultural life and passing it from one generation to another generation. Different from the stories based on the Western tradition it represented the most suitable medium in order to provide a distribution of the knowledge within the tribe, to provide explanation about the interconnection between the world of spiritual or supernatural beings and the world of humans, and at the same time to influence lives not only of the individuals but also the whole community. Stories and narratives usually present tribal history, rules or traditions performed by storytellers, the privileged members of the tribal community, whose important task has become keeping and mediation of those stories and the knowledge to others. In comparison to the Western understanding of notion of time and space, Native Americans interconnect past, present and future, often based on the traditional principle of cycle, where the events re-told by the storytellers may overleap those normally constant quantities. What makes the myths and stories so important in the rituals and ceremonies is their healing effect and the fact that the oral culture of Native Americans emphasises the principle of their retelling and repetition during the ceremonials and the healing power appears in the moment the story or myth is retold. Many contemporary writers such as Paula Gunn Allen or Leslie Marmon Silko interweave that in form of elements of the traditional story into their work as it is obvious in Silko’s novel *Ceremony*<sup>4</sup>.

The question of the oral tradition in the contemporary indigenous literature has become an issue on which non-native as well as native critics focus. Gerald Vizenor or Arnold Krupat, as Native Americans, are some of the most significant writers and literary critics, who deal with the issue of oral culture and tradition in the literature of Native Americans. In Krupat’s book *The Voice in the Margin. The Native American Literature and Canon* (1989), he analyses the definition of canon in literature. He focuses on the literature of the Native American writers and their position in the Euro-American literary production, as well as on the influence of the oral

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<sup>4</sup> Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* Penguin Books, 2006

tradition in the works of Native American writers. His critical view on the distinguishing qualities of the Native American writers and their unique styles, often inspired by the oral traditions and recognizing them by the critics oriented more on the traditional canons.

The present day Native American literature is developing as it includes topics starting with works oriented on more global, general and non-native issues, or the works dealing only with the themes strictly about the Native American culture. On the other hand it presents works where the traditional issues of the the Native American culture are interwoven with the elements of contemporary American literature, and their authors return back to their cultural backgrounds, yet, they apply them on various aspects of life situations the generation of today's Native Americans has to face.

#### **4 Oral Culture, Storytelling and the Australian Aboriginal Culture**

As in the case of Native Americans, the geographical position of the Australian continent affected the peoples who had been living there for thousands of years, having had a minimal contact with the other cultures they established one of the oldest civilisations in the world. The onset of the Europeans on the Australian continent also meant a complete violation of the previous way of life the indigenous population had been used to. With the increase of white men settlements, at the beginning as penal colonies and later proper settlements, the land and the indigenous peoples living on them were forced to adjust to a completely new situation.<sup>5</sup> The policy of the government in relationship towards the indigenous peoples has been marked by *“massacres, dispossession and later, attempts to ‘breed out’ the race by removing mix-blooded children from their parents to bring them up in institutions or foster homes,”*(Webby, 2006, p.10), likewise the situation in the North America.

Similarly as Native Americans, also Australian Aboriginals represent a heterogeneous group of indigenous peoples, whose population before the arrival of the European explorers was close to 300,000 people, what seems not much, though, if we take into account the size of the land and the size of the population with the amount of the individual tribes each speaking own language, it is impressive. The early contacts with the Australian continent come from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, where the sailors from Portugal, Spain and the Netherlands reached the shores of Australia or an island close to it, Tasmania, (Webby, 2006) what is about a century later than Columbus had arrived to the American shores. The British and their arrival to Australia in the 18<sup>th</sup> century<sup>6</sup> turned out as to become a disaster plaguing the fragile cultural environment of Australian Aboriginals, for Cook's consideration that the land inhabited by the Indigenous people, who *“did not use the land in the European sense of cultivating it, “so “they did not own*

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<sup>5</sup> 1786, a small fleet of eleven ships, carrying officers, marines and 736 convicted felons, to found a penal settlement at Botany Bay in New South Wales (Webby, 2000, p.6)

<sup>6</sup> 1770, Captain James Cook arrived to claim the eastern part of the continent for the British Crown and to name it New South Wales (Webby, 2000, p.6)

it, “ led to that the lands could be officially taken and settled according to the legal fiction known as ‘terra nullius’”(Webby, 2006, p.6) Van Toorn critically concludes the facts that not only the direct violation of an ancient culture by diseases, taking the children from families in order to civilise them, but also the indirect one forced through the process of Christianisation providing prohibition of the traditional ceremonies or any use of the native languages. For the dominant Western culture the oral culture of the Aboriginals seemed savage or uncivilized; however, some individuals recognized its high value hidden in the oral traditions, based on the stories, songs or narratives but also were accompanied by unusual artistic expressions drawn into sand or scarified into the skin, as paintings or carved sculptures. (2000)

For the indigenous inhabitants of Australia and Torres Strait Island the stories and their telling have been an inseparable part of their culture with an influence on its preserving for the next generations. Even though many other indigenous cultures became extinct because of the impact of the Western civilisation and the process of assimilation, the communities of Australian Aboriginals and inhabitants of the Torres Strait Islands were somehow successful in preserving their cultural heritage within the communities despite the attempts of the government to “breed out” the aboriginal population, resulting into cultural phenomena such as the “*stolen generation*”<sup>7</sup> affecting the whole population.

The written form of the texts is characteristic for the Western civilisation; on the other hand, Australian Aboriginals have based their culture on the oral traditions and knowledge shared orally. The stories, songs, or narratives contained all the information necessary for their survival. The survival of the community lay in the remembering the knowledge from the so called “survival” stories. (van Toorn, 2000)

Ritual performances accompanied by songs and dances all deeply relate to the religious world of the Aboriginals and the period known as the Dreamtime, stories explaining the creation of the Aboriginal world and everything in it. Such ritual performances used to be performed or at least guided by the chosen elder, a man or a woman, who had a similar function as a medicine man or shaman in the Native American culture, for they participated on the spiritual and social life of the whole community. On the contrary to the tales, songs represent more special forms, and also their themes differentiated from the traditional stories and the everyday language of the tribes, as they were shorter and simplified, or they contained additional syllables or sound changes.

So if we take in ratio the number of Australian Aboriginals and the inhabitants of the Torres Strait Island to the number of individual tribes, the number of different language groups is enormous, what of course has been reflected in the variations in the forms of the oral genres performed within individual tribes differ often from each other.

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<sup>7</sup> The term Stolen Generations describes the many Aboriginal – and some Torres Strait Islander – people who were forcibly removed from their families as children by past Australian Federal, State and Territory government agencies, and church missions, from the late 1800s to the 1970s. see more at <http://www.nsd.org.au/stolen-generations-history/>

For most of the indigenous peoples, without exception Australian Aboriginals, the oral tradition still has an inevitable position within the tribal cultural life. Many traditions, songs or dances related to the rituals and ceremonies were in case of Native Americans often held in secret and privacy of each tribe, while Australian Aboriginals considered those rituals and songs more commodities that “*can be exchanged with other groups in return for rights to perform an alien song or dance or in return for desired trade-goods and ceremonial artefacts.*” (Thomson in Ross, p238) Even though singing and dancing have a high and almost sacred position in the Aboriginal culture, the status of the story-telling is important as well. Similarly as in the Native American communities, the stories served for sharing the knowledge with the younger generation in order to learn things helping them to survive in the rough conditions of the environment they lived in. Van den Berg describes storytelling as the process important to be practised from the early age in order to learn “every aspect of their specific Aboriginal culture.”(van der Berg, 2008, p2) Its function influenced not only the individuals but whole communities in order to specify not only the knowledge but also the “*social constructs of behaviour and family ties*” influencing the tribal or clan identification. (van der Berg p.2)

In a case of the previously spoken texts most of them was transformed into songs, even though the lyrics were less comprehensible, the content and the message in them were more appreciated.

Despite the fact that the political reprisals against the Aboriginals and their cultures were vast, they have survived. Their traditions and knowledge based on the key idea to survive in a hostile natural environment have helped them to overcome demanding conditions established by the Western civilisation. Van Toorn presents that even today the traditions remained in their original form in some distant areas of the central and the northern Australia. The reason is simple, for they are timeless tools for saving and sharing their ancestors’ knowledge. Paradoxically, it happens also in the areas that are close to cities, and the traditional way of life is still preserved to some extent, however, the adjusted and transformed form and content of the traditions to the contemporary times may not be so obvious for the observers from outside such community. (2000)

For the Aboriginals the oral tradition is not only represented by the narratives and songs, but also it includes “*a set of rules and protocols for their transmission.*” (van Toorn, 2000, p.20) Those rules serve to distinguish the differences between the knowledge that is supposed to be public and the knowledge, purpose of which is sacred and only for a close circuit of people. Van Toorn mentions the songs and stories previously owned by people who passed away, and the proclaimed taboo on their using as well as naming or mentioning those people, what might result into punishments. Such idea then questions the use of modern tools for preserving the knowledge and cultural traditions of the Aboriginals, as it enables recording them into print, audio or visual form, what clashes with the Aboriginal traditions. In order to avoid the changes in the recorded content, some of the communities have accepted the new means of preserving their knowledge and traditions, yet, they have applied them with respect to their traditions and rules. (van Toorn,

2000) As the results of such decisions have become the literary works of the authors of the Indigenous origin, that are accepted by both the Indigenous and the non-indigenous communities, for example Alexis Wright.

For the non-Aboriginal observers performed stories and songs are mostly only the stories and the songs, while for the Aboriginals they represent a two-way channel through which the knowledge flows between the performers and the audience. The word “performers” fits in this case well, as during the ceremonial gatherings as well as ordinary events the stories are accompanied by other forms of communication such as dancing, painting or just regular activities between the performers and their audience, for that all is strongly interrelated with the traditional way of life of the Aboriginals.

In the past, the process of transcription of the original Aboriginal oral narratives into their printed version turned out to be a problem from the the Aboriginals point of view, as such narratives were often edited by non-Aboriginal editors and for the non-Aboriginal market, therefore, the changes made on the original texts often omitted the information that was supposed to be shared originally. Also the importance of the authorship, that in the Aboriginal community is inevitable, lost its sense. The growth of awareness led to attempts avoiding such situations. To preserve the voice of the storyteller and other specific elements characteristic for the Aboriginal culture, there was created a special orthographic recording of the Aboriginal words or non-standard English pronunciations in order to catch not only the verbal but also the non-verbal sounds made by the storyteller. (van Toorn, 2000)

The 18<sup>th</sup> century represents the period when the Aboriginals started their participation on the production of various texts, mostly translations resulting from the cooperation with scientists, government officials or representatives of the missions established on the continent, therefore the value of the texts that would have respected the voices of the Aboriginals was low. The onset of the mission schools during the 19<sup>th</sup> century enabled the Aboriginals to learn write and read, although the price they had to pay, as many children were taken away from their homes to provide them a proper education. In many cases the children were completely cut off from their cultural environment and lost a chance to stay in touch with their parents for “*their own educational good.*” (van Toorn, 2000, p.23) Today, the effects of that process are obvious on those people, who have become its victims and call themselves “*the stolen generation.*”

The process of education brought two sides, the one side meant for the Aboriginal children the way how to acquire the knowledge of the white people, so they could somehow survive in their world on the other hand they had to pay for that as their Aboriginal identity was stolen.

The growth of literacy did not mean an absolute freedom, yet, the Aboriginals learnt how to transform their thoughts into written words, even though adjusted to the European conventions and religion. Some of the Aboriginal writers and critics, for example Mudrooroo, called it “*writing for governor’s pleasure.*” (van Toorn, 2000, p.24)

The other side effect of the literacy turned out as some changes within the hierarchy of the Aboriginal communities, as originally the source of the knowledge were the elders and the oral traditions they had, and the decisions they made about the community. The cooperation between the elders, who were responsible for the decisions and the young people who were literate, was beneficial, as the ideas and demands were written in the language of the dominant culture, and direct them to the authorities, led to keeping the traditional hierarchy. (van Toorn, 2000)

The government gave the Aboriginals the possibility to get the education, but at the same time the authorities took away step by step their rights and freedom. However, the aim to control the Aboriginals turned against it, as the literacy and education became a tool for fighting against the negative policy and means for negotiation with the government rather than personal use. Riots in the USA during the 1960s resulting from the disagreement with the policy of the government and the participation of the country in wars in Asia, as well as a growth of movements fighting for equal civil rights regardless of race, turned out to be an inspiration for disagreement with a problem of racial discrimination even in Australia. The referendum in 1967 led to the milestone, as the serious changes in the Australian Constitution were made. For Aboriginals such changes meant a right to vote and were accepted as the citizens of Australia. (Webby, 2000) One of the ways how to survive in the world of the dominant white culture has become the transformation of the oral tradition of the Aboriginal culture into its written or other recorded form in order to keep the knowledge and experience alive for further generations establishing some kind of string interconnecting them with their past. New forms of media such as film or television allow telling the stories the Aboriginal knowledge and share it with a wider audience not only of Aboriginal but also non-Aboriginal origin.

From the previous paragraphs it is obvious, that the oral tradition and the storytelling have an inevitable position within the indigenous cultures and communities such as Australian Aboriginals and Native Americans. It is possible to identify many differences, on the other hand many similar patterns starting with the historical events and from them resulting influence of the Western civilisation with all the consequences on the indigenous peoples, as they reach to the contemporary times affecting all areas of of the indigenous way of life, including the field of literature and the unique interpretations the authors such as Alexis Wright or Leslie Marmon Silko present in their works. This information opens a space allowing further research focusing on cross-cultural comparative study of various indigenous authors and their literary works, presenting the original cultures applying the principles of their oral tradition and storytelling to cope with their common experiences of the past colonial domination of the Western culture over theirs.

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