

A Guide To Using Oral Traditions in SCA Submissions

Disclaimer 1

The explicit acceptance of oral history in the SCA is extremely new. While the College of Arms has over fifty years of precedents on how to handle various written sources, there are very few guidelines on how to handle oral traditions. No doubt these precedents will be formed as submissions are made and guidelines are refined. This is merely a first attempt to document a possible process of using oral traditions for heraldic submissions.

Disclaimer 2

Many of the cultures for whom we are to rely principally on oral histories are cultures that have also suffered long histories of cultural erasure and subjugation. In addition, cultures might have rules or taboos around the proper usage of names or designs that might make a submission inappropriate culturally. This article is purely commentary on the technical aspects of SCA heraldic submissions, and not on the validity or appropriateness of any particular situation. Submitters are strongly urged to work with the modern representatives before submitting items from indigenous cultures, and to listen closely to any concerns about appropriateness of any given submission.

Introduction

In 2022, the SCA released guidelines on using oral history resources. This article aims to lay out how best to apply those guidelines to the use of oral traditions as a resource for heraldic submissions. Under SENA, the official ruleset for heraldic submissions, an element must be “reasonably period”, and using oral histories gives us another way to document elements. Oral histories present their own unique challenges for dating elements for heraldic submissions, as they seldom contain calendrical dates or other easy ways to date the records. This article will lay out some basic ways in which a submitter can provide at least a rough date for elements found in oral traditions.

Reliability

Despite The Board's resolution, many people might still doubt the reliability of oral traditions. It is true that not all oral traditions are reliable, just as not all written sources are reliable. However, evidence indicates that oral traditions at least can be trustworthy as primary sources.

There are several examples of information being passed down over long periods of time with high fidelity. The most extreme examples of this come from Australia. In 2015, a team in Australia led by linguist Nicholas Reid demonstrated that stories and traditions passed down by Australian Aboriginal tribes accurately recorded areas where sea levels had risen significantly, with some stories going back over 10,000 years. In Indonesia, anthropologist James J. Fox, initially a skeptic of the reliability of oral traditions, found that oral genealogies on Roti Island in Indonesia matched records held by the Dutch East India company going back to the 1600s. Every single lord of the region of Termanu, between 1662 and 1966, was mentioned in Dutch

East India Company records.¹ Evidence shows that oral traditions can indeed pass down information over long periods of time.

An important indication of reliability for an oral tradition is if the tradition it was passed down includes some sort of system of monitoring and reinforcement by members of the community. Writers about Aboriginal oral traditions describe a cross-generational “scaffolding” where a tribal member’s nieces and nephews would check someone’s version of a story against the version they learned from their grandparents. Similarly, Heinrich Rink wrote of traditional Greenlandic story-tellers:

“The art requires the ancient tales to be related as nearly as possible in the words of the original version, with only a few arbitrary reiterations, and otherwise only varied according to the individual talents of the narrator, as to the mode of recitation, gesture, &c. The only real discretionary power allowed by the audience to the narrator is the insertion of a few peculiar passages from some other traditions; but even in that case no alteration of these original or elementary materials used in the composition of tales is admissible. Generally, even the smallest deviation from the original version will be taken notice of and corrected, if any intelligent person happens to be present.”

Different cultures of course had different traditions and relationships with their traditional stories, and competing traditions might coexist within a culture. For instance, New Zealand historian Judith Binney writes about how traditions around the Maori mystic Te Kooti varied between families who supported or opposed Te Kooti. However, evidence is clear that it is possible for dense information to be passed down for centuries, and that non-literate cultures had social structures to facilitate just such transmission.

Types of sources

Oral traditions can be grouped into a few broad categories. Keep in mind that not every story falls neatly into one category, and that any observation about a category is by nature a generalization and not a rule. Below are examples of types of oral traditions that might be worth examining for useful data.

Cultural Epics: This refers to longform narrative stories, often poetic in nature, that record important histories of a group. Well known examples include the Iliad of Ancient Greece, the Sundiata of Mali, and the Kalevala of Finland. These stories can be extremely useful sources, but have their pitfalls. On the one hand, they were often passed down by professional storytellers, usually are attested by multiple existing transcripts, and are usually long documents with several different names mentioned. On the other hand, the story might be mythical or allegorical, the characters included might not have normal names for the culture, and if there are multiple transcripts they might not all line up. There is also the risk that mythology from dominant religions like Christianity or Hinduism might have been added to the original story. Still, an epic that tells important group history might be a useful source for submissions.

¹ Fox, James J., *Harvest of the Palm*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, x

Ethnographic Records: This term is used here to refer to folk tales, oral histories, and other traditions that have at some time been recorded by anthropologists or by the members of a culture. Priests and scholars were recording the stories of non-literate peoples at least as far back as the Spanish Conquests in the Americas, though the field as an academic discipline emerged in the 19th century. Many of the same advantages and disadvantages as cultural epics apply to ethnographic records, and for many non-literate cultures they might be the only type of historical data we have. They usually contain a mix of historical records and allegories or myths, so care should be taken to understand the nature and role of any particular story. There is also a risk that the recorder made changes to the original material, especially with outside recorders or older methodologies. Finally, different stories in a published collection might have taken place at different times, so dating one story does not date all stories in the collection.

Oral Lineage Records: In many non-literate cultures where lineage was considered important, long lists of ancestors, sometimes along with other information, have been passed down orally. While it is unusual for these records to contain direct date references, anthropologists have created rough dating guides for similar records by assuming an average of 25 years between generations. These can be rich sources for documentation if a submitter can indicate which names were likely used before 1600.

Post-period Sources: While post-period sources cannot usually be used in SCA submissions, they can still be useful for research and for helping to establish patterns. Per SENA, a name can be used if it can be shown that it fits a period pattern. This generally requires at least three similar examples to be found. If the oral records show a naming pattern, post-period names that also fit the pattern might reasonably be inferred. Post-period patterns can also be useful for establishing bynames and other naming conventions.

Dating A Source

Comparison to written records: There is a long history of contact between literate and non-literate societies. For example, Arab travelers extensively in Africa and Southeast Asia. Mesoamerican scribes mentioned their non-literate neighbors. Europeans visited many quarters of the globe. Comparing oral histories to written histories can be invaluable. For instance, the epic *Sundiata* discusses the establishment of the Mali Empire, which Arab traveler ibn Battuta visited and wrote about. Records passed down by the Inuit people of Greenland and recorded in the 1800s by the Danish Anthropologist Heinrich Rink recorded encounters between Norse Greenlander settlers and an Inuit boy named Kaisape. Medieval records indicate that Europeans abandoned Greenland in the 1400s, meaning that Kaisape's encounter happened before then. Combined with archeological evidence that the Inuit people first migrated to Greenland around 1200, this indicates that the name Kaisape was in use among the Greenland Inuit roughly between the 1200s and 1400s. These comparisons to written records might give exact or general time frames depending on the source, but are extremely useful for corroboration.

Astronomical Records: If an oral record mentions astronomical events, it might be possible to use these to date the record by matching them to records of literate societies, or by calculating when the event might have reasonably happened. This can most easily be done with eclipses, but supernovae and other events might also be useful. For instance, Haudonosaunee

(Iroquois) oral traditions record a total solar eclipse shortly before the founding of their confederation. Indigenous records from Guam reference the appearance of a new star that “rivaled Venus”, possibly a supernova that other sources mention as happening in 1054 AD. These astronomic references can be invaluable for helping to date an oral tradition.

Geological Evidence: Mentions of geological changes or events, such as earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, can also be useful. Hawaiian myths captured important events in Mauna Loa’s eruption. The Klickitat people of Oregon told the Lewis and Clark expedition of a natural bridge that had once stood over the Columbia River, a story that was later backed up by geologists. Geological references in oral traditions might be another way to help date names and other elements.

Archeological Evidence: Archeological evidence can be extremely useful at putting general boundaries on when an oral record might have taken place. For example, archeological evidence points to settlement of New Zealand by the Maori in the 1300s, indicating that the 1300s form a threshold for the time period any Maori oral records were first transmitted. Similarly, archeological evidence shows Inuit migration to Greenland starting in the 1100s. This type of information can be used to corroborate oral histories and show where different groups of people were at different periods in time, though it of course needs to be

Putting It Together: If a submitter can pinpoint an exact year or even decade when a name was used, that is ideal, but is also unlikely given the fundamental nature of oral histories. A good submission that uses an oral tradition, should at the very least make an argument that a name was probably used before 1600. Past that, it should try to limit the time frame to a distinct time span or era, such as “The Mali Empire”, or “between 1100 and 1400.” Different types of evidence can be combined. For instance, in his article “Dating the Iroquois Confederacy”, Bruce Johanson takes the account of an eclipse in Haudenosaunee record *the Great Law of Peace* to narrow down the foundation of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy to a few possible dates. He then uses archeological accounts of a decline in violence amongst Haudenosaunee people around the mid 1100s, along with estimating the length of family lineages, to narrow down the founding of the Haudenosaunee confederation to circa 1190 AD. While this is more evidence than might strictly be needed for most oral tradition-based submissions, it does give a good example of what such work might look like.

Further Considerations

Full Names: In SCA submissions, any name submission must have a given name and at least one byname. This can present a further complication for documenting names from oral traditions. As with any SCA submission, any name may be combined with a part of the submitter’s legal name or with an existing branch name. In addition if a naming pattern, such as patronymics or descriptive bynames, is shown to exist in the records it can be used to establish the pattern for SCA submissions. That said, given the prevalence of mononyms throughout history, some cultures may not present any good options for full name phrases outside of SCA allowances.

Charges: Documenting heraldic charges is largely the same as documenting heraldic names. The submitter should show evidence that oral traditions reasonably infer the existence of the charge (and that humans knew of it) before 1600. This will likely be most useful in helping

to document either animate charges like plants and animals, or indigenous tools. For instance, Maori stories about the kiwi bird establish that the Maori knew of the bird before regular European contact in the 1700s. Hawaiian oral histories about the *polulu*, or shark-toothed spear, could similarly be used to establish one as a charge. A heraldic charge submission based on oral traditions should also include some evidence on what exactly the charge looked like in period, if possible.

Sound Changes: All languages change over time. English famously had the “great vowel shift” between the 1400s and 1700s. French lost most terminal consonants and changed its stress patterns. These types of changes affect all languages. This presents challenges when working with oral traditions, since it isn’t always clear how linguistic evolution has affected the source material.

This means that older recordings of sources are more likely to capture older patterns of pronunciation. For example, Greenlandic Inuit went through several sound changes between its first written records in the 1850s and now, including widespread orthographic spelling reforms in 1973. This means that modern Greenlandic does not even sound like the Greenlandic of the 1800s, let alone medieval Greenlandic.

The College only registers spelling, not pronunciation, nor are submitters with French or English names forced to say them with period pronunciation. Similarly, the College might allow submitters using oral records to register what are likely modern approximations of period names. Alternatively, there might be interest in examining how scholars have reconstructed sound changes over the centuries, to get closer to a historical pronunciation. This will doubtless be something for the College of Arms to discuss.

Putting together a submission

So what might a successful name documentation of an oral tradition look like? It should have the following:

1. Where the submitter found the name.
2. A brief description of what the source is.
3. A brief recounting of the provenance and chain of transmission of the name.
4. The date range the submitter believes the name is accurate to, and why
5. Any cultural background that might be beneficial for the College of Arms to know.

A submission based on oral records is not inherently different from one based on written records. It might take more context and research than a regular submission. However, oral traditions offer an important opportunity for cultures that have traditionally been shut out of the SCA because of a “lack of evidence”, and it behooves heralds and submitters to take advantage of this new opportunity.