

Oral Religion

1. In the previous video I discussed how religious symbols and ritual are rooted in the hypermimeticism and hypersociality of the human species. We are born immature, still fetuses compared to other mammals-- vulnerable, helpless and utterly dependent on our parents for our continued existence. We learn how to fend for ourselves, even feed ourselves, through imitation. We learn how to behave through imitating the behavior of others; we learn how to manage our feelings by imitating the feelings we see in others, especially our caregivers.
2. Speech enhances this primal, mimetic communication exponentially. Indeed it was likely what enabled the last hominid species to evolve, *homo sapiens*, to outcompete its *homo erectus* ancestors across the planet, resulting in the latter's eventual extinction.
3. In Europe, for example, when *homo sapiens* crossed from Africa into Europe 60,000 years ago, the native Neanderthaler inhabitants, though far better adapted to the climate, and far more familiar with the flora and fauna of the landscape, gradually retreated into less and less sustainable environs until becoming completely extinct around 35,000 BCE.
4. Neanderthal anatomy does not appear to have the jaw musculature and oral cavity necessary to enunciate, that is to make more than grunts and screams, similar to apes today. Now this claim is speculative, based on a reconstruction from skulls and skeletons, that have alone survived, and it has been recently challenged. However it remains likely that even if they did have a rudimentary ability to pronounce phonemes, it would have been far poorer than that of our own *homo sapiens* ancestors. (1) In the second half of the twentieth century scientists tried to teach language to apes. Speech was quickly abandoned in favor of hand signals and shaped objects. The chimps just did not have the biological wherewithal to enunciate. Eventually the entire project was abandoned due to criticism of unconscious signaling despite best efforts from researchers. The hypothesis that apes could learn language was effectively falsified. However in *homo sapiens* the jaw has receded, enabling greater flexibility and control to muscles around the mouth and the tongue moves back and down the throat to create an oral cavity to function as a sound box. Vocal chords also now become much more robust.
5. Why would speech be such a “killer app” in our ancestors’ toolkit? First, speech enables better coordination, both in hunting and gathering. Hunters can plan ahead as well as

draw from past experience. Gatherers, could inform one another on what, when and where the best fruit and berries are. By enabling a speaker to think beyond the immediate present, and his or her own head, language enhances intelligence.

6. Storytelling by and about people also enables the cultural evolution of reputation, which exponentially enhances cooperative networking amongst members of a given band or even tribe. (1) Apes maintain relational bonds through grooming, picking bugs off their coats of hair. (2) Robin Dunbar argues the gossip performs a similar function among humans. It is in fact a far more powerful bonding activity than grooming. For telling stories about others not only builds bonds but inform reputations, teaching one another who can be trusted to cooperate, whom is good to have as a friend or ally. Gossip is also an enhancement in that unlike grooming, gossip leaves one's hands free for multitasking. One can gossip while hunting and gathering as well as when caring for kids and preparing meals. Dunbar argues that oral peoples spent an awful lot of time gossiping. (3) In fact, we still do, not only orally but through magazines and novels, news shows and soap operas. How much of a talk show is effectively gossip?
7. Speech also exponentializes education. Rather than simply showing how something is done, a teacher can tell their students why they do what they do the way they do. (1) So too a chance invention or a new discovery need not be lost forever after its creator dies. Rather older adults can share the wisdom gained from their longer experience with others and the next generation. Speech enables the rise of communal and traditional wisdom to be handed down from one person to the next.
8. Take tools for example. Crude handaxes, and small sharp-edged flint flakes represented the pinnacle of human technology for two million years. (1) However 60,000 years after the evolution of speech, a human being walked on the moon and (2) I am creating videos like this over the internet..
9. Most fundamentally however, speech stabilizes experience, enabling speakers to label objects and name others, describe events and identify courses of action. Language structures our experience into meaningful narratives. Indeed, much of one's thinking just is talking to oneself. (1) One can be said to have learned a second language, when one not only can speak it, but think in it. Its different syntax and lexicon create a distinctive

network of concepts and reasoning, opening up a new way to think, even experience one's life and world.

10. However, despite such advantages over mere mimetic communication, speech, like imitation still remains rooted in the here and now. People can talk to one another, only if both are present, face to face. Now such immediate presence enables speakers to use mimetic communication as well. Speech evolved as an enhancement of mimetic communication through grunt and gesture, but tone and delivery, song and theatrics also enhances speech by directing and focusing an audience's attention to not only hear but listen to what is being said.
11. However the new ways of thinking and living that speech opens up can only live on and spread if they are memorable. As literate people ourselves, it can be hard to imagine what it would have been like to live in a purely oral culture where nothing can be recorded; where what is forgotten is lost, needing to be reinvented or rediscovered all over again. Thus just as mimetic education relies on focusing attention, so oral teaching relies on memory.
12. What facilitates memory? First and foremost, storytelling. Oral wisdom is usually embedded in stories. (1) Stories in turn are memorable if they are about memorable deeds (2) performed by memorable people, (3) memorably told. Gods and heroes battling fearsome foes, all dramatic, larger than life, epic. Homer was called the educator of Greece. (4) Memory is also aided through exaggeration and hyperbole, figurative and rhythmic speech. Poetry is easier to remember than prose. Song lyrics can come back to mind virtually spontaneously, (5) advertising jingles can run in the background of consciousness unbidden. This Coca Cola ad is from 1971, but I can still sing it. Can you sing along?
13. Oral wisdom is also embedded in memorable sayings. Proverbs are short and sweet. Aphorisms use rhyme, repetition, alliteration, juxtaposition and paradox to fix what it says in one's memory. (1) A stitch in time saves nine. (2) Fools rush in where angels fear to tread. (3) Jesus is a good example. He always teaches with memory in mind.
14. Oral thought is also dialogical. To think something through one can talk to oneself, but even better to talk it out with someone else, who can help you remember relevant facts,

raise questions to clarify and refine, even help you keep track of what you just said, so that you can focus your attention on what to say next. I'm lost, what was I saying?

15. Indeed while a book is an object, speech is an event, a performance, addressed at a particular time to a particular audience in a particular setting. Due to these particularities, a storyteller never tells even the "same" story the same way. A different audience, at a different time, with a different history, may be interested in different incidents or characters in the same story. Addressing one's audience just means attending to how the audience is attending to what you are saying.
16. Just as oral communication is narrative, so oral identity is narrative as well. You are the stories you tell about yourself: the feats you have accomplished, places you have traveled, the struggles you have endured. Your life is your story. A meaningful life makes for an interesting one.
17. But even more you are the stories told about you by others in your community. Your reputation defines you. To be a man of honor is to be looked up to, your word is trusted, your wisdom sought out. One with a good reputation has faithful friends and strong allies, eager to cooperate and collaborate. Honor is sacred in oral culture, for it is essential to a strong network of support essential for a flourishing life of meaning and purpose.
(1) Shame on the other hand is social death, and often, soon enough literal death as well. For to be shamed is to be shunned, and so vulnerable to being scapegoated rather than helped in times of trouble.
18. The oral self is thus a communal self. Your position and standing in the community, the relationships you are embedded in, define who you are. Your thoughts though, like your desires, are rarely your own. Rather they express the wisdom of the community. You think how everybody thinks.
19. Individual thought, in its being idiosyncratic, only makes you an idiot. (1) All three words share the same Greek root: *idiotēs*. To think different is to be a threat to the common thinking of the community. It risks confusing you and everyone you talk with, which in turn risks everyone forgetting what we all need to remember, the hard won wisdom of our ancestors.
20. "Heresy" similarly comes from the Greek for being divisive. "Right belief," in Greek, "*orthos doxa*" is a belief that is true in the carpenter's sense of "true"-- straight and

square, fitting flush in its proper place. Heretical speech disrupts communal memory and thereby threaten the collapse of communal wisdom and the social order it enables and legitimates. The heretic is thus a mortal threat to the social order held sacred by all righting thinking people and needs to be treated accordingly. Thus with religious speech also arises religious violence. A later video will explore more fully the logic of religious violence and how ritual taboo and sacrifice emerged to channel and contain it.

21. In sum, oral religion is communal religion, sustained by communal ritual and memorable stories of memorable ancestors, performing memorable deeds that win lasting honor and fame for them and for those who ally themselves with them; all right thinking and right acting members of the tribe in the service of the common good of all.