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Review

Before the Ballot Box: Oral Tradition, Community Storytelling, and the Unwritten Curriculum of Political Socialization

Abhisek Khan

Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, Bankura University, India.

Correspondence should be addressed to: abhisekchem912@gmail.com

Abstract: Political socialization scholarship has long mapped the formal pathways through which citizens absorb civic values schools, media, electoral campaigns, and family discussion. What this literature has periodically underplayed is the durability and reach of an older, less visible channel: oral tradition. Long before constitutions were drafted or ballots printed, communities transmitted their political understandings through story, song, praise poetry, mythic narrative, and ceremonial speech. This manuscript examines oral tradition and community storytelling as an unwritten curriculum of political socialization one that operates beneath the institutional surface of formal democracy but profoundly shapes the civic dispositions, authority perceptions, and collective identities that democratic participation eventually draws upon. Drawing on peer-reviewed and institutional sources available online, the paper argues that oral tradition performs at least four politically socializing functions: it transmits norms of legitimate authority and political accountability; it encodes collective memory of injustice and resistance that informs present civic identity; it creates spaces for culturally sanctioned political dissent; and it cultivates narrative civic agency the capacity to tell one's own political story. The paper also addresses the challenges oral traditions face in the twenty-first century from curriculum marginalization, language extinction, and digital displacement, and closes with a set of recommendations for integrating oral tradition meaningfully into contemporary civic education.

Keywords: Oral Tradition, Storytelling, Political Socialization, Civic Identity, Indigenous Democracy, Narrative Memory, Community Narrative, Civic Education, Spoken Word, Cultural Transmission.

Introduction

There is something worth contemplating in this fact: writing, as a technology, is roughly 5,000 years old. Human communities, by contrast, have been forming political relationships, transmitting authority structures, debating the legitimacy of leaders, and

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passing civic obligations across generations for well over 100,000 years. What served as the medium for all that political transmission before the written word existed, and in the many communities that remained primarily oral long after writing arrived, was the spoken narrative. The story told around the fire. The praise song performed at the chief's installation. The grandmother's account of what the colonial soldiers did to the village. The hip-hop verse that names the names of the dead.

Yet political science and socialisation research have not always known what to do with this material. As EBSCO Research Starters (2024) observes, oral tradition remains one of the primary forms of cultural transmission in contemporary society, a point supported by studies conducted on six continents; yet its relationship to political learning has been treated as peripheral, ethnographic, or pre-modern. This is a significant analytical gap. Political socialisation, as a field, asks how citizens come to hold the values, beliefs, and behavioural dispositions that sustain or strain democratic governance. If oral narrative is a principal vehicle by which communities encode their understandings of power, obligation, and collective identity, then its exclusion from the central conversation of socialisation theory leaves that theory incomplete.

This paper takes oral tradition seriously as a political institution. It does not argue that storytelling is a relic requiring archaeological sympathy; rather, it argues that oral narrative functions as an active, adaptive, politically consequential form of civic communication one that has simply never had to compete with writing for relevance in the communities where it remains most alive. The analysis proceeds from the classical forms of oral political transmission, through the narrative construction of civic identity, to the challenges oral traditions face today and the implications for civic education design.

Oral Tradition as Political Curriculum: The Transmitted Architecture of Civic Life

To call oral tradition a curriculum is not a metaphor. In the strict sense, a structured, valued body of knowledge is transmitted from one generation to the next, with deliberate attention to what must be remembered and what may be lost; oral tradition meets that definition more fully than many formal syllabi do. EBSCO Research Starters (2024) identifies oral tradition's role in preserving aspects of law, lore, history, art, and religion across cultures, noting that ancient peoples used storytelling to record what mattered most about how their communities were organised and what obligations bound their members together. These are the raw materials of civic life.

Consider what praise poetry actually does in West and Southern African oral cultures. Britannica (n.d.) documents how South African praise-singers create orally performed evaluations of tribal chiefs and public figures functions that combine the panegyric and the critical, the celebratory and the accountable. The political content in those performances is not incidental; it establishes the benchmark against which a leader's conduct is measured, publicises the community's expectations, and delivers, through verse, in public, before the gathered community, the verdict on whether those expectations are being met. This is accountability journalism performed in song, centuries before newspapers. In that sense, the griot tradition did not precede democratic accountability; it was a form of it.

The Britannica account of Aboriginal Australian songlines is similarly striking. These networks of short songs, each addressing both mythical and tangible landmarks, function simultaneously as maps, legal documents, cosmological texts, and governance frameworks encoding territorial sovereignty, environmental custodianship obligations, and inter-group relationship protocols in an oral form that Aboriginal communities have maintained across millennia. What the songlines transmit is not nostalgia but governance: who has rights over which country, on what terms, and under whose watchful memory. The political content of oral tradition, in other words, is often the entire architecture of a community's civic life, not a supplement to it. Table 1 maps the principal oral forms through which political content has been transmitted across cultures, detailing the socialisation functions each performs.

Table 1

Oral Tradition as Political Socialisation: Modalities, Mechanisms, and Social Functions

Oral Form	Carrier Community	Political Content Transmitted	Socialization Function
Praise poetry and griotic performance	West and Southern African communities	Leadership legitimacy, ancestral authority, community values, criticism of unjust rulers	Establishes political hierarchy; benchmarks against which current leaders are evaluated
Mythic and cosmological narrative	Indigenous peoples across Asia, Americas, Oceania	Origin of community law, territorial sovereignty, sacred governance obligations, inter-group relations	Anchors civic legitimacy in cosmological frameworks; shapes attitudes toward land, authority, and obligation
Carnival and satirical performance	European folk traditions; Rhineland Germany, Southern Europe	Critique of power; inversion of social hierarchy; political commentary through humour	Democratic safety-valve function; socializes dissent as legitimate; subverts uncritical deference to authority

Oral Form	Carrier Community	Political Content Transmitted	Socialization Function
Spoken word poetry and hip-hop	African American communities; contemporary urban youth globally	Social justice demands; critique of structural racism and inequality; political mobilization rhetoric	Transmits counter-hegemonic political values; activates civic identity among youth; links personal experience to systemic critique
Family oral history and intergenerational testimony	Diasporic, migrant, and post-conflict communities	Historical memory of persecution, displacement, or resistance; lessons of political survival	Constructs political identity through inherited memory; shapes attitudes toward state authority and civic responsibility
Songlines and performative geography	Aboriginal Australian communities	Territorial sovereignty, spiritual governance, environmental custodianship obligations	Socializes land-based political relationships; encodes sovereignty claims in embodied cultural memory

Note: Compiled from EBSCO Research Starters (2024), Britannica (n.d.), Rock and Art (2025), IJHSSM (2024), RAIS Education (2024), and Noyam Journals (2024).

Narrative, Memory, and the Formation of Political Identity

Political identity the sense of oneself as a member of a political community with particular obligations, grievances, and aspirations does not arrive fully formed at the threshold of citizenship. It is built, over years, from accumulated narratives about what the community has been through, who has wronged it and who has defended it, what has been sacrificed and what still demands redress. This is precisely the domain in which oral tradition works most powerfully: it provides the raw material of political identity through story.

Wray-Lake et al. (2025) offer a timely framework for understanding how civic identity develops among adolescents, arguing that young people construct civic selfhood through narrative processes, specifically through the stories they tell about themselves and their communities in relation to power, injustice, and possibility. Importantly, their analysis emphasises that young people's interactions with others, their exposure to accounts of power and privilege, and their experience of being heard (or not) by adults in positions of authority are all constitutive of civic identity formation. Oral tradition supplies the intergenerational version of exactly this process: the stories told by elders and community narrators are the medium through which young people first encounter political power its exercise, its abuse, its contestation before they encounter a ballot paper or a parliament building.

The political memory encoded in oral tradition is not simply retrospective; it is productive. Rock and Art (2025) documents how personal accounts of activism by women

who used oral expression to organise, protest, and spark political reflection became vehicles for challenging established norms, grounding demands for equality in lived experience rather than abstract principles. The oral testimonies collected within the German Frauenbewegung (Women's Movement), for instance, drew their political force precisely from their narrative character: they were not policy arguments but stories of real women's lives, and their persuasive power rested on the recognition they demanded, the empathy they created, and the collective identity they assembled from individual accounts.

This is the deeper logic of what Sage Journals (2025) calls storytelling's role in combating epistemic injustice. When marginalised communities are denied access to formal political institutions and when their concerns are absent from official records, public discourse, and policy agendas, oral tradition becomes the archive that sustains political identity against erasure. It is, in a quite literal sense, the civic record of communities who have not always been allowed to appear in anyone else's civic records. CIRCLE (2024) captures this in its analysis of civic engagement among Native American youth, noting that within tribal communities, engagement with political life is uniquely shaped by long-standing traditions that view civic participation as sacred, transmitted, first and foremost, through spoken story and ceremonial narrative.

Storytelling, Indigenous Democracy, and the Civic Education of the Unrepresented

The relationship between oral tradition and political socialisation becomes most vivid and politically urgent in the context of indigenous communities, whose governance structures, civic obligations, and political memories have been carried almost entirely in oral form, and whose relationship with formal democratic institutions has frequently been defined by exclusion rather than participation. Frontiers in Political Science (2025), in a systematic literature review of indigenous political participation trends globally, documents how Indigenous peoples in Latin America have increasingly used storytelling and digital mobilisation to advocate for their rights a pattern that represents not a departure from oral tradition but its adaptation to new platforms while preserving its fundamental character as community narrative in the service of political claim-making.

IFES (2023) offers an important analytical bridge in this regard, identifying informal civic engagement the kind that operates through community networks, cultural practices, and non-institutional channels as a crucial precursor to more formal political participation. For indigenous communities, storytelling gatherings, ceremonial speeches, and oral accounts of political history constitute precisely this kind of informal civic

engagement. They are not decorative supplements to democracy; they are the political education through which civic agency is cultivated before institutional democracy provides a formal channel for its expression. The IFES analysis further highlights the particular significance of programmes that meet young people where they are, engaging them through the cultural forms already meaningful to them as a strategy for expanding civic participation among those historically excluded from formal democratic processes.

Noyam Journals (2024) adds an important pedagogical dimension, noting that participants in its South African community research complained about assessment-driven school curricula that crowd out oral storytelling, despite its central role in cultural and political transmission. This finding resonates across contexts; it points to an institutional failure to recognise oral tradition as a legitimate and valuable component of civic education. The hidden curriculum of political socialisation that oral tradition represents cannot fulfil its democratic role if the formal curriculum treats it as irrelevant to civic preparation. Integrating storytelling meaningfully into civic education is, from this perspective, not a culturally sensitive accommodation but a pedagogically sound decision grounded in evidence about how political identity actually forms.

The Digital Migration of Oral Tradition: Continuity, Disruption, and the New Griot

It would be tempting to treat oral tradition and digital media as opposites: the analogue warmth of community storytelling versus the cold speed of social media feeds. The reality is considerably more interesting. Rock and Art (2025) notes that podcasters, vloggers, and social media creators now function as twenty-first-century troubadours, carrying community narratives to audiences that traditional storytelling gatherings could never have reached. The political content has not disappeared; it has migrated.

RAIS Education (2024) traces this migration in the context of spoken word poetry. Beginning with prehistoric oral traditions and continuing through the African American griot tradition to contemporary slam poetry competitions, the paper documents how spoken word has acquired new civic vitality among younger generations, finding in poets like Amanda Gorman, Danez Smith, and others a genre that fuses the community address of oral traditions with the amplificatory reach of social media. The paper's observation that social media and digital platforms are amplifying voices traditionally marginalised in mainstream political narratives is significant: the democratic potential of oral tradition its capacity to give political voice to those excluded from formal channels is being extended

rather than extinguished by digital technology, at least under conditions where communities retain meaningful control over their own narratives.

That qualification matters. ScienceDirect (2023), in its analysis of youth civic engagement across Indonesia and Pakistan, documents both the civic activation potential and the fragmentation risks of digital platforms for young people's political socialisation. Digital storytelling connects; it also scatters. The deep community bond that traditional oral performance creates the shared physical space, the call and response, the co-presence of speaker and audience is not fully replicated by asynchronous digital consumption, however wide its reach. Sage Journals (2025), examining storytelling as a research methodology for multicultural communities, makes a related point: intermediaries who share participants' language, culture, and lived experiences are essential to the full communicative and civic power of storytelling, because they preserve the relational depth that allows stories to generate genuine political solidarity rather than mere information transfer.

Threats to Oral Tradition as a Socialisation Resource: A Framework

The political socialisation function of oral tradition faces a set of interconnected structural threats that are partly ancient and partly distinctively twenty-first century in character. Table 2 maps these challenges, identifying their manifestations, the communities most affected, and the institutional responses best positioned to address them.

Table 2

Challenges to Oral Tradition as Political Socialisation in the 21st Century: Manifestations and Responses

Challenge	Manifestation	Affected Communities	Recommended Response
Curriculum marginalization	Assessment-driven schooling displaces oral storytelling; English-only instruction erases vernacular political memory	Indigenous and minority communities globally; documented in South Africa (Noyam Journals, 2024)	Integrate oral storytelling formally into civic education curricula; protect indigenous-language oral instruction space
Language extinction and transmission break	Disappearance of minority languages severs the linguistic vessel in which political memory is encoded	Breton (France), Ladin (Italy), Indigenous languages across Asia and the Americas	State-supported language revitalization programs; community-based oral archive projects; intergenerational storytelling festivals
Digital displacement and platform fragmentation	Social media accelerates consumption of decontextualized political content, weakening the	Generation Z globally; documented in studies of Indonesian and Pakistani youth digital civic	Design digital platforms that preserve community storytelling dynamics; support podcast and oral

Challenge	Manifestation	Affected Communities	Recommended Response
	community listening and narrating bond of traditional oral culture	engagement (ScienceDirect, 2023)	media formats in indigenous languages
State repression of counter-narrative	Governments deploy censorship, surveillance, and legal threats to suppress indigenous and minority oral political traditions	Latin American indigenous communities; Native American communities in the USA (Frontiers, 2025)	International legal protections for oral cultural heritage; support for community-based safe storytelling spaces free from state surveillance
Commodification and decontextualization	Commercial appropriation strips political content from oral traditions, reducing them to entertainment products divorced from their civic socialization functions	African American spoken word and hip-hop; Indigenous Australian songlines	Community-controlled cultural institutions; intellectual property frameworks that recognize collective custodianship of oral political heritage

Note: Compiled from Noyam Journals (2024), Rock and Art (2025), ScienceDirect (2023), Frontiers in Political Science (2025), EBSCO Research Starters (2024), RAIS Education (2024), and CIRCLE (2024).

Toward a Renewed Civic Role for Oral Tradition: Policy and Practice

The preceding analysis suggests several concrete directions for policy and practice.

Civic education curricula need to make genuine room, not tokenistic gestures, for oral storytelling as a mode of civic learning. The evidence from Noyam Journals (2024) and IFES (2023) converges on the same finding: young people learn citizenship not only through textbooks and mock elections but also through the narratives they inherit, create, and share with their communities. Schools that are built entirely around written, assessment-driven knowledge transmission are not politically neutral; they are actively displacing a form of civic education that has existed for longer than any formal curriculum.

Informal civic engagement programmes and the scholarship that evaluates them should explicitly recognise storytelling gatherings, oral history projects, and community narrative events as legitimate civic engagement activities rather than as cultural supplements to the real civic work happening elsewhere. IFES (2023) makes the case that programmes engaging young people through culturally meaningful forms generate broader and more sustained democratic participation. Oral tradition, properly supported, is one of the most culturally meaningful forms available.

Finally, state-supported language revitalisation, community oral archive projects, and legal protection for the collective intellectual property of oral political heritage all

deserve serious policy attention. Rock and Art (2025) documents the connection between language survival and the survival of political memory: when a minority language disappears, so does the particular political worldview it encodes. That is a loss not just for the community that loses it, but for the democratic plurality of the broader society.

Conclusion

The image of democracy as a system of written constitutions, formal institutions, and counted votes is not incorrect, but it is incomplete. Beneath the visible machinery of democratic governance lies a vast substrate of political learning that was never written down and never will be: the stories communities tell about who they are, what has been done to them, what they owe each other, and what kind of power is and is not legitimate. This is the unwritten curriculum of political socialisation, and oral tradition is its oldest and most deeply rooted form.

What this paper argues is that taking oral tradition seriously as a political institution is not an act of nostalgia; it is an act of analytical accuracy. Storytelling shaped political identity long before the ballot box existed, and it continues to shape political identity among the millions of people in indigenous communities, diasporic populations, marginalised urban youth, and women in oral cultures, for whom formal political institutions have often been sites of exclusion as much as participation. If the goal of political socialisation scholarship and civic education practice is to understand and nurture democratic citizenship in its full human breadth, then the voices of the griot, the slam poet, the elder telling her grandchildren what happened, and the family passing down what must not be forgotten all deserve a place at the theoretical table.

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