

Stepping Stones through Time

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Introduction

Knowledge must be very differently organized in an oral culture than it is in one with writing and, of course, memory is the key. People remember through time, and the memory of an individual is limited in extent. A society may organize itself in such a way as to maximize the common store of what is remembered and may also find ways of setting aside those matters that lie outside its memory range. In this article I aim to formulate a descriptive model for a society that operates in terms of what I call a “memory capsule” of four generations that provides an expectation of recollection over a period of about a hundred years. This model represents a rather static way to speak of the actual human experience that moves forward constantly through time as each generation replaces the one before it, and we should take account of this process, but I have found through the study of Indo-European material, and comparable material from elsewhere, that it is possible to envisage this model in terms of movement through a system of alternate generations, with each of the alternations having its distinctive nature. In the Indo-European case, it is proposed that the generations are marked by the central institution of kingship, with each king’s reign differing in nature from that of his predecessor and successor. The “stepping stones” of my title suggest a way of grasping this proposed dual movement through time.

Focus on the Oral-Cultural World

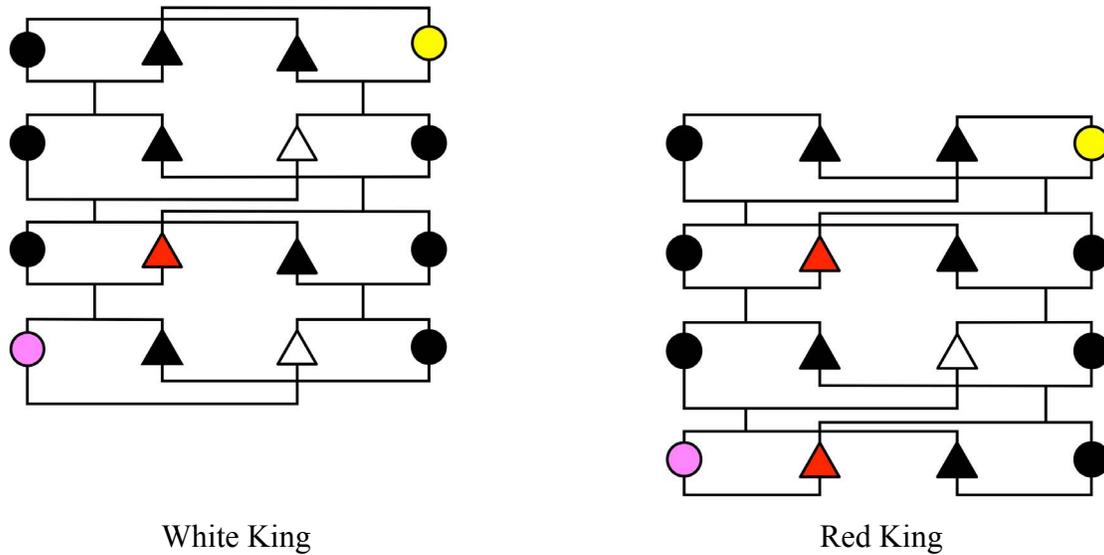
The stress on the written word in the West has meant that we are only belatedly looking into the nature of the oral-cultural world that must have existed before writing came along. It could be argued that scholarship has long taken the historical approach to the Indo-European past too much for granted, and moving toward an oral approach calls for a radical and much more rewarding shift in perspective. A historically known society does not just come out of nothing but has a prehistoric past. We cannot trace this past in any detail before the advent of writing, but what we can reasonably do is build a spatiotemporal model of the posited prehistoric cosmology, resting on folk material and on scraps of information from earlier times (Lyle 1990, 2006, 2007, 2010). It is an orally organized cosmology that provides the foundation from which the diachronic developments that we can document took their rise. The oral-cultural elements found

in Indo-European societies are not simply offshoots of those processes for which we have early written evidence, but belong to a free-standing oral base to which written elements were later attached. It seems well worthwhile to put effort into grasping the nature of this base. As Walter Ong commented (1982:13): “You cannot without serious and disabling distortion describe a primary phenomenon by starting with a subsequent secondary phenomenon and paring away the differences.” We have to attempt to explicate the primary phenomenon of a posited cosmological society in its own terms.

In undertaking study of this kind, it is helpful to consider the operation of oral, or largely oral, societies throughout the world and to use comparative methods of research, as well as seek clues within the wide Indo-European culture area. It should be noted that, even when it is Indo-European evidence that gives the possibility of historical depth, the results may be found applicable to other cultures as well.

The current essay pertains to a specific scenario with regard to time, and its basic idea is that people without written records may apprehend a limited segment of linear time and may work to organize and control it in an optimal way. They can achieve such organization by using the time measure immediately available to them, that of human generations. However, because of the wide spread that is possible between births from one couple, a socially agreed upon means of determining the length of a generation is required. In the Indo-European model, a generation coincides with a king’s reign that is constrained by an age-grade system and can be postulated as lasting twenty-four years (Lyle 1997). In a system of alternate kingship, each king can marry the daughter of his predecessor, thereby tying the concept in with biological descent within a central family (Lyle 1990:119-33).

A story may help to make the point more vividly and, in fact, it is stories that have carried the mythic information down to us. Oinomaos is king of Pisa and refuses to let his daughter Hippodameia marry any man who cannot defeat him in a chariot race. He has deliberately set this test since he is such a fine charioteer that he is pretty well guaranteed to win. Pelops, however, with divine aid, wins the race and—this is the point—takes over the kingdom from the defeated Oenomaos when he marries his daughter (Frazer 1921:2.156-63). A fresh generation is in opposition to the one before it and displaces it. Pelops is an outsider, but a secure way of keeping a system of alternate kingship like this going in perpetuity is to have two lines of kings derived from a common ancestress and to have matrilineal succession; that feature is built into the model. Some of our earliest Indo-European evidence is from the Hittites and in this context it is possible to see in the historical, and not just the legendary, sources that two lines of males alternate, marrying into the line of queens (Finkelberg 2005:65-89, 177-82). It should be added that a matrilineal way of determining eligibility for kingship does not preclude a strong emphasis on the two royal patrilineal lines.



- Triangles indicate males.
- Circles indicate females.
- Vertical lines indicate descent.
- Horizontal lines above indicate sibling relationships.
- Horizontal lines below indicate marriage relationships.

Figure 1: Alternate forms of the four-generation capsule with bilateral cross-cousin marriage. The kings (white and red) are shown in relation to their ultimate ancestress (yellow), and the previous king’s daughter—whom the candidate for kingship must marry—is highlighted in purple.

The model, some parts of which are more firmly grounded than others, operates through a block of four generations that can be called a “four-generation capsule” or a “memory capsule.” When we set the model in motion, it moves forward in time by steps of a generation, each of which corresponds to a king’s reign, the alternate steps being distinguished as different from each other (see Figure 1). There are accordingly two parallel series that are shown as white and red, colors that can be derived from the Indo-European evidence but that are in any case useful for making the distinction.

If we take the metaphor of stepping stones, a human traverses the immense river of time by placing first one foot and then the other on the stone immediately ahead of the left or right foot. The sequence has to start with one side or the other and it is hypothesized that the first step is taken by the left foot, as illustrated in Figure 2. Of the white and red pair, left corresponds to white and, in the terms used by Georges Dumézil (1958:7, 25-26), to the sacred aspect of society that is at the top of the hierarchy. Any Indo-European structural study today owes a debt to the insights of Dumézil in the twentieth century (Littleton 1982), and his triad of the functions is brought into the discussion below.

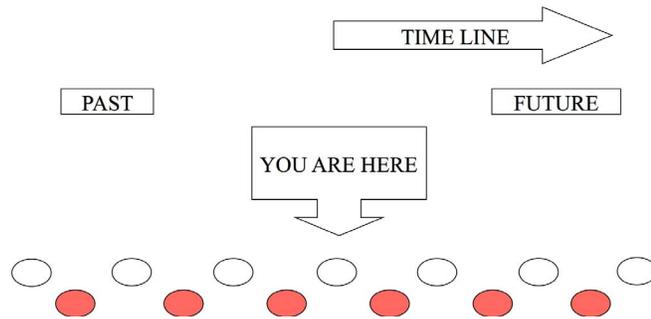


Figure 2: Orientation in time.

The Indo-European Four-Generation Capsule

I have called the Indo-European block of four generations a “capsule” to emphasize its isolation as a separate entity. This block is quite evident, but it has not been granted the high importance that it seems to demand, perhaps because the supporting evidence has been dispersed through different subject areas. In the Greek context, Lin Foxhall has drawn attention to the significance of the bilateral kindred (*angkhisteia*). She writes (1995:134):

Though the *angkhisteia* is “horizontally” expressed as kinship out to second cousins, “vertically” in time it is those who share great-grandparents. The youngest members are three generations removed from a common ancestral couple whom they probably never knew personally, though their parents most likely did. . . . The limits of the *angkhisteia* become symbolically significant as the temporal and social limits for most of the privileges and responsibilities of kinship.

The Romans also took their ancestry back to the great-grandparents as is apparent in their system of male naming (West 2007:395, n. 59). Foxhall has proposed calling this temporal block “human time” as opposed to the “monumental time” that lies outside it, explaining that the important difference between the two is their varying relationship to memory. Poets have to call on the aid of the Muses for knowledge of monumental time, but there is “no problem with remembering within human time because no one is ever more than one step/person removed from direct access to a particular memory” (Foxhall 1995:135).

A study of Irish and Welsh kinship by T. M. Charles-Edwards concludes that there was a Common Celtic kinship unit of the “true kindred” (*derbfine*) that consisted of a descent group of four adult generations. Horizontally this group extended to second cousins, and the unit thus corresponds to the Greek *angkhisteia*. There are indications in addition of an extended lineage of indefinite length that had different functions (Charles-Edwards 1993:55, 187, 213-14, 471-72). The similar Indian *sapinda* system also adds to our understanding since it specifically includes mention of a man of the living generation and of three generations of the dead (Dumont 1980). The *pinḍa* is a ball of rice and a man offers three *pinḍas*, one each to his deceased father, grandfather, and great-grandfather. There is a sharp cut-off point when a former named ancestor joins the ranks of the

undifferentiated dead, and we can see clearly that this implies the existence of a culturally defined memory span (see Figure 3).

It should be noted that the Indo-European evidence for the four generations drawn on in these instances goes back patrilineally to an ancestor, whereas in the modelled cosmology, which is assumed to relate to a period in prehistory, it is an ancestress rather than an ancestor who plays a key role so far as royal succession goes.

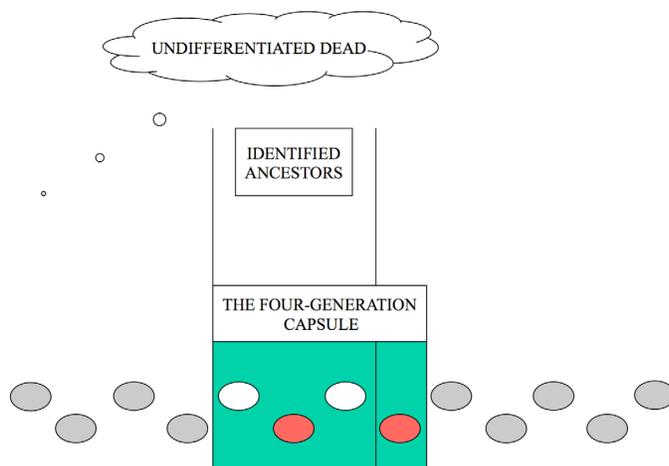


Figure 3: The four-generation capsule.

Alternate Generations and a Fourfold Cycle

One of the breakthroughs that allowed assumptions about Indo-European structures to be broken down and re-assembled was Kim McCone's interpretation of the triad of "functions" (the sacred, the physical force, and fertility) that Dumézil (1958:18-19) had found among the Indo-Europeans. McCone argued (1986 and 1987) that this triad related to the life stages of old men, youths, and mature men in an age-grade system of which he found traces in the Indo-European historical record. Following up on this assertion, I explored the Indo-European materials in the light of the structures found among East African pastoralists more fully than McCone himself had done and showed how the Indo-European pattern of four—relating to the four directions of space—could be reconciled with the threefold system recognized by Dumézil (Lyle 1997). This reconciliation can be accomplished by considering the system of the Maasai, for whom at any one time there are four age-classes present in the society: the unmarried young men called *moran*, the mature men in the period just after marriage called "elders," the mature men later in life who can be called "firestick elders," and the old men referred to as "senior elders." When men move up from one class to another, the change affects the whole of the system simultaneously since each class has to be of the same size. However, the mature men are present in two classes and so form a half of the system. There are three life stages—youths, mature men, and old men (corresponding to the three functions in the order of physical force, fertility, and the sacred)—but there are four classes since the "mature men" group consists of two classes. So, study of age-grading in East Africa supplied an answer to the puzzle of the apparently conflicting threefold and fourfold sets (Lyle 1997).

The threefold nature of some of the East African age-grade systems can be related to the structure of alternate generations, with the mature men belonging to one generation alternation and the young and old men belonging to the other. The systems of the Turkana and Karimojong, for example, have clearly marked generational alternations, a fact I observed in relation to the posited Indo-European alternate succession over twenty years ago (Lyle 1990:121-22):

North-East Africa provides a number of cases of another institution [besides alternate royal succession] relevant to this discussion, that of alternating generation sets. I will take two examples where the alternate generations are identified by colour since I will be referring to colour in the Indo-European context. Among the Turkana, there are two groupings or alternations. Every male child at birth automatically becomes a member of that of his grandfather, and is therefore in the opposite one from his father. The members of the alternations are called the Stones, who are especially associated with black ornaments, and the Leopards, who are especially associated with white ornaments (Gulliver 1958). Among the Karimojong, those belonging to one of the two alternate generation sets are referred to as yellow and wear brass ornaments, and those of the other are referred to as red and wear copper ornaments.

Neville Dyson-Hudson, who has written extensively about the Karimojong, describes how membership in one or another of the alternations is shown outwardly by the wearing of such ornaments (1966:176):

Ornaments are distinguished as “red” (copper) and “yellow” (brass) and take the form of earrings, bracelets, forearm-clasps, and finger rings. Members of a generation-set may wear only ornaments of the colour appropriate to them, and the neck rings worn by their wives are similarly restricted.

I was evidently skirting a potential problem when I avoided mentioning the names of the alternations among the Karimojong since there was controversy on this point. Dyson-Hudson held that there was a cycle of four named generations that related alternately to the two colors, but his view was challenged by John Lamphear, who had made a study of the Karimojong as well as the neighboring Jie people and doubted the existence of a fourfold cycle (1976:35-37; 43, n. 44). I did not follow up on this debate at the time, but the possibility of such a fourfold cycle came to my attention again recently when reading a study by Wendy James, who drew on Dyson-Hudson for the Karimojong and on Malcolm Ruel for the Kuria of Tanzania and Kenya to demonstrate a recurrent cycle of four generation-sets paired alternately (2008:87-92). It seems that the Karimojong, strictly speaking, may actually have a twofold rather than a fourfold cycle (Knighton 2005:137; 146, n. 27), but Ben Knighton, who makes this point, implies that there is still a fourfold schema of some kind by commenting that the pattern in the informants’ minds of an order of creation laid out in fours like the world directions “easily leads to seeing the generation-sets in a cycle of four” (137, n. 10). It would obviously be desirable to explore this point further, for it may have a more general application, and it is certainly suggestive for the Indo-European situation to which I shall now turn.

The presence of four parts (the four generations of the memory capsule) but with a switch between only two possibilities (the institution of alternate kingship) is just what has emerged in the Indo-European case, and we can consider how the members of a cycle of four generations might have been identified if found in connection with such a system. The answer seems to be that the Indo-Europeans would have used color throughout since there is evident use of a fourfold color set. Three of the four colors are those of the basic color triad, with white relating to the sacred (and priests), red to physical force (and warriors), and black/blue to fertility (and the cultivators, cattle-owners, and the like). The fourth color is yellow in the Indian context, where the sequence is given as white, red, yellow, and black/blue both in the vertical series of the parts of the body of the cosmic man and on the horizontal plane in association with the world quarters. The equivalent to yellow in the color set found in the context of the Roman circus is green. In our terms, the colors yellow/green and black/blue can both relate to the third function since it has two components.

The Roman circus has been interpreted cosmologically, and the charioteers belonged to one of four factions distinguished by color that prove very interesting in connection with this discussion of twofold and fourfold cycles. The colors fall into two pairs with a dominant and subordinate partner in each case: dominant blue is paired with white, and dominant green is paired with red (Lyle 1990:35-47). It can be argued that white and red were the primary colors at an earlier stage than we have direct knowledge of, perhaps at the time before Rome drove out its kings (Tertullian, *De Spectaculis* 9; Lyle 1990:45-46), and I shall take these colors here as the dominant members of the pairs. In the generation sequence, we can start with the two dominant colors, white and red, and then, to keep up the alternation, we have black/blue (partner of white) and yellow/green (partner of red) as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The Color Categorization of the Two Alternations and Four Generations.

Indo-European royal alternations	Indo-European qualities of the reigns
white	white, magical force
red	red, physical force
white	black/blue, fertility of water
red	yellow/green, fertility of earth

The sequence revolves, and each generation as it comes along enters into one of the four pre-established identities that would not be just a matter of color but would foreground certain qualities. The result would be that each king’s reign is tagged separately in the sequence and forms a memory slot with a distinctive flavor. The qualities proposed here are those of the three functions as discussed by Dumézil, but with the third function falling into two parts. In identifying their separate characteristics I am drawing on a unique representation of the Oinomaos/Pelops chariot-race as a ritual contest in which blue is associated with Poseidon and the produce of the sea while green is associated with Demeter and the produce of the land (Lyle 1990:130-31). A fourfold cycle structured in this way with the alternate generations linked together is also found among the Kuria (Ruel 1962, 1997), although they do not have color identifications for the alternations as the Turkana and Karimojong do.

The proposed Indo-European age-grade system (partially based on Maasai practice) has four half-classes in each generation set and, if the initiations are hypothetically placed every six years, we have a generation length of 24 years and a fourfold cycle lasting 96 years. The period of the four-generation capsule, whatever its precise length, is a limited one and the time before it is likely to be predominantly a place of myth and legend rather than of history. Dyson-Hudson finds that the Karimojong are preoccupied with immediate events and immediate relationships and that “beyond that recent point from which descent relationships are periodically recalculated, the past holds little interest for individuals” (1963:399); “they either incapsulate the past into present relationships or release their hold on it altogether” (1966:258).

Conclusion

Indo-European heritage places importance upon a set of four generations, and this would seem to be an important factor that affects understanding of the role of human memory in the organization of its associated oral culture. The existence of a four-generation set implies a shifting shallow lineage, each fresh generation of which can metaphorically be called a “step” into the future as it differs from the one before it and resembles the grandparent generation. James spells out some of the implications of attempting to grasp a system such as this (2008:87):

The logic of alternating birth classes . . . cuts across what is widely supposed to be the “natural” side of social reproduction. It cuts across the common descent supposed between parent and child, assigning these to quite separate and opposed, ontological kinds. In theory, alternating birth classes

and descent lines are rather different conceptions of continuity. But they do occur together in practice, and ethnographers have therefore tried to represent their workings—“hybrid” systems as often as not—as functional wholes based on a common logic. This is why both the primary ethnography and secondary commentaries are so complicated.

This hybridity is also the reason why it is such a complicated task to model a structure that takes into account the specific features of an Indo-European “ethnography” that has come down to us only in fragmentary form. We can see that it is a “hybrid,” but we cannot assume that the particular features of importance to the Indo-European cosmology have been drawn upon in quite the same way within any current society. The components are likely to be present, but the particular makeup could be unique. A total Indo-European system is not present to be observed, as is also sometimes the case in ethnographies of recent cultures that have been subject to fragmentation. Putting the pieces together differs in extent but not in kind from what is being done by anthropologists who have been able to undertake fieldwork or are interpreting the work of predecessors who have done so in the relatively recent past. The apparently “safe” approach of going back through the historical evidence is therefore not really so if it is built on a misunderstanding of how societies without writing operate. As James notes (2008:85), in order to grasp the essentials, we first “need to defamiliarize ourselves from what might seem normal and reasonable” in the current Western context.

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