

Unit 2

History and Memory

Introduction to Unit

This unit examines several examples of the complex interplay between history and memory, and situates these examples in the context of globalization. First is the story of the changing histories and social memories surrounding Christopher Columbus, an individual first mythologized and later vilified as an icon of the profound global changes since 1492. Next is the story of how new evidence can transform historical interpretation about both the distant past and the present: a look at historical breakthroughs in deciphering Mayan glyphs as well as the historical realization that history can be conveyed—as it is among the Luba of central Congo—without the use of written records. Finally, this unit explores the notion of commemorating the past—and the challenges such commemoration often ignites—through monuments, museums, and artifacts exhibited in museums. While all these visions and memories of the past have local importance, they also all occur in a global context and have global significance.

Learning Objectives

- Identify different ways individuals and groups remember and represent the past.
- Discuss some of the causes that prompt professional historians to reinterpret and to ask new questions of the past.
- Analyze why commemorating the past is publicly debated.
- Identify ways individuals and groups challenge the collective memories of other individuals and groups.

Preparing for This Session

Read Unit 2 in the *Bridging World History* online text. You may also want to refer to some of the Suggested Readings and Materials. If you feel you need more background knowledge, refer to a college-level world history textbook on this subject (look under the index for Christopher Columbus, Maya, Popular Culture).

Unit Activities

Before You Begin—15 minutes

Discuss the difference between history and memory before you watch the video.

- List at least three specific examples of how you know what happened in the past: family stories; home movies; photographs; textbooks; videos (History Channel); other texts (biographies, autobiographies, historical monographs); museums; historical movies. Which of these are examples of memory, and which are examples of history?
- If you were to make a historical exhibition of yourself or your community, what might cause the displays to change dramatically? How would the displays stay the same? Are the items in the exhibition historical interpretations or memories of your past?

Watch the Video for “Unit 2: History and Memory”— 30 minutes

While you watch the “History and Memory” video, keep a record of the kinds of examples used to show the many ways that humans create community memory and use history. Moreover, note the reasons why historians disagree about the topics raised in the video. Finally, use the blank outline of the timeline of interpretations of Christopher Columbus (in Activity 2) to record the information on the changing interpretations of Columbus.

Activity 1: What Issues Are Currently Debated in World History?—25 minutes

Discuss in a small group why you think the case studies in this episode were selected for a world history series. The examples used in the video to explore the concepts of memory and history are:

- changing interpretations of Christopher Columbus,
- increasing understanding of Mayan glyphs,
- continuity of Luba memory boards and scarification,
- controversial exhibits and museums in the USA and Korea, and
- a contested autobiography written by a Mayan activist in Guatemala.

What other examples could have been included in the video?

Unit Activities, cont'd.

Activity 2: What Causes Historians To Change Their Interpretations of the Past?—20 minutes

Use the information in the video to create a timeline of the ways that interpretations of Columbus have changed over time in the Americas, especially in the USA. After you fill in information for the timeline below, discuss with a partner how historians today deal with the different interpretations of events they investigate. (A completed timeline is at the end of this chapter.)

Timeline of the Changes in Interpretations of Columbus

(Briefly summarize the interpretations of Columbus for each of the events listed.)

1882: Knights of Columbus

1893: Columbian Exhibition

1942: Samuel Eliot Morrison

1973: Alfred Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492*

1992: Quincentennial Celebrations

Evaluate the issue of re-interpretations of important historical events in these additional ways:

- Investigate how Christopher Columbus is represented in at least two American history and world history textbooks. Be sure to check the publication dates of the books. How might you account for the differences in the ways he is portrayed? Possible answers: brave and inventive explorer; exploitative and cruel colonizer; lucky but clueless medieval evangelist. The interpretations might match the changes in interpretations of the effects of Columbus's voyages and colonization. The purpose of the textbook might help explain the interpretation of Columbus.
- Research the following questions: Is there a statue of Christopher Columbus in your town? When was it made? If there is none, find an example in another city. How is Columbus portrayed? How does the statue of him reflect the time when it was made or the group who commissioned the statue, the base, and maybe even the park or building where it is displayed? How might a statue of Columbus be sculpted today?
- Read John E. Kicza, "Getting It Right About Getting It Wrong," review of *Sinking Columbus: Contested History, Cultural Politics, and Mythmaking during the Quincentenary*, by Stephen J. Summerhill and John Alexander Williams, (H-LatAm, April, 2002). Use the information in the article to write a letter to the editor of a newspaper in 1993 praising or criticizing the events related to the Columbian Quincentenary in 1992.

Unit Activities, cont'd.

Activity 3: How Does Technology Change the Way Historians Interpret the Past?—65 minutes

- Discuss in a small group: What did the video claim about how historians learned about the Maya and how Mayan glyphs were understood in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? How did technology change the way historians interpreted the ancient Maya?
- Look at the following panel of Mayan glyphs. What do you think they mean? Who do you think commissioned them? List the kinds of information historians need to interpret texts like Mayan glyphs. How do you think historians gain the kinds of information you listed?



Item # 2536. Linda Schele, MAYAN GLYPH DRAWING 120 (n.d.). Courtesy of FAMSI, The Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc.

Description: Carved limestone panel with three figures. The central figure, K'inich K'an Joy Chitam II, stands in a dancing posture holding aloft a serpent-footed axe and wearing the shell earpiece of Gl. His father, K'inich Janaab Pakal (right), and mother, Lady Tz'akbu Ajaw (left) sit flanking him. Pakal holds a small, full-figure K'awiil and Lady Tz'akbu Ajaw holds a personified Jester God. The text records an anniversary of the death of his ancestor, K'an Joy Chitam I.

Current Location: Washington, DC, Dumbarton Oaks

Use the descriptive information below to check your previous understanding of the glyph's meaning to the Mayan rulers who commissioned it.

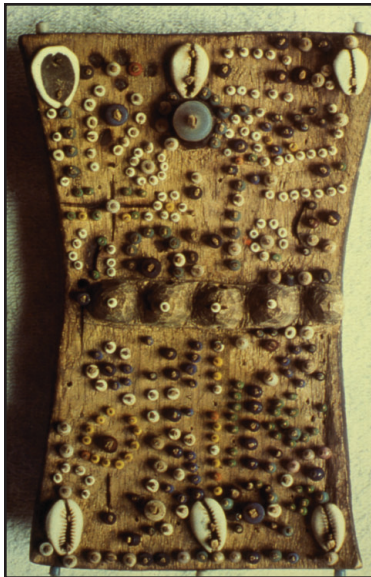
- K'inich K'an Joy Chitam II was thirteenth Mayan ruler of Palenque (702–722 CE).
- K'inich K'an Joy Chitam II's dancing posture may be related to the Mayan creation story in *The Popul Vuh* that tells of Hun-Nal-Yeh who, after being beheaded by gods of the underworld, was reborn from his own severed head as a handsome young man, dressed by beautiful girls for triumphal dancing. Dancing might be interpreted as a symbol of a new ruler coming to power.
- K'awiil was a god of lightning, often represented with one snake foot and an axe in his forehead. Because he also was a protector of royal lines, he often is included on kings' scepters. The snake-footed axe is a symbol of royalty.
- Gl is the oldest of the triad sibling gods of the Maya. He is associated with the planet Venus as well as the sun, and is shown wearing a shell earpiece.
- The personified Jester God, usually shown in a three-pointed cap, is another ancient symbol of Maya royalty. The form is developed from the Olmec reverence for the maize plant, stylized in Olmec art with only three leaves.
- The ancestor K'an Joy Chitam I was the fifth Mayan ruler of Palenque (529–565).

Discuss as a class: In what way does the increasing understanding of Mayan glyphs through epigraphy, archaeology, and ethnography reveal the way that historians do their work?

Unit Activities, cont'd.

Activity 4: Why Do World Historians Use Non-Textual Materials From Pre-Literate Societies?—25 minutes

Discuss with a partner how to read the Luba lukasa (memory boards), pictured below.



Item # 3713. Mary Nooter Roberts, LUKASA (1989). Courtesy of Mary Nooter Roberts.



Item # 3711. Mary Nooter Roberts, LUBA MEMORY MAN WITH LUKASA (1989). Courtesy of Mary Nooter Roberts.



Item # 3712. Mary Nooter Roberts, LUBA MEMORY MAN WITH LUKASA (1989). Courtesy of Mary Nooter Roberts.

The Luba use “lukasa,” or memory boards, to transmit the history of their communities. The lukasa is a political object used to show who has power, what happened to rulers in the past, and how the ruler is connected to other local leaders. The owners of the lukasa are a mixed group of men and women who act as the community’s historians and supporters of the local leader. They also serve as a check on the power of kings and chiefs. Interpreting the lukasa is difficult and requires many years of training and practice. The designs on the lukasa also serve as a way to honor divine kings. The local animals and plants are included in the designs to reflect the community’s relationship with the environment. Thus, the lukasa can be read to understand both physical and religious geography of the region.

Discussion Questions

- How do world historians deal with determining how “true” community memory is?
- How much attention is paid to pre-literate peoples in sub-Saharan African in your textbook? Why do you think that African history typically has been allocated less space in American textbooks of world history?
- In what ways could the video sections on the Luba be added to your textbook? What themes in world history could be addressed in a world history textbook by including the Luba lukasa?
- Why do you think the historians who created this video series wanted to include the Luba’s way of constructing memory and history in the video section?
- Compare the interpretations of the Luba memory boards and the Mayan glyphs. In what ways do historians rely on archaeological and laboratory science to understand the Maya? To what extent does the “scientific” knowledge about the ancient Maya seem more reliable than the years of training it takes to read a Luba memory board?

Homework

Read Unit 2 in the online text, Section 3, Reading 2: Linda Schele, "History, Writing, and Image in Maya Art," *The Art Bulletin* 78 (Spring 1996): 412–16 and answer the following questions.

Reading Questions

- Why is she "recovering a lost world view from the artwork" she studied?
- What kind of public history did the Mayan rulers want to create? In what way were they also creating a "soul force"?
- What was important about the way Schele's writing changed when she wrote for the public?
- What do you think about this example of historians helping people today better understand their ancient past: "We have brought the Maya the means of deciphering their ancient histories and the tools to debate and adapt the histories we are attempting to create."
- How public should the writing of history be? Who should be involved?
- Are world historians or national historians more likely to be accused of using history for contemporary political purposes?

Optional: Visit the Web Site

Explore this topic further on the *Bridging World History* Web site. Browse the Archive, look up terms in the Audio Glossary, review related units, or use the World History Traveler to examine different thematic perspectives.

Completed Timeline for Activity Two: Changes in Interpretations of Columbus

1882: Knights of Columbus

Catholic men in the USA founded the Knights of Columbus, a fraternal organization, which boosted Columbus as a Catholic—and national—hero. The Knights raised statues; paraded with floats, drum corps and bands; and lobbied to have Columbus Day declared a national holiday.

1893: Columbian Exhibition

To mark the 400th anniversary of Columbus's first voyage, organizers at the 1893 Columbian Exposition—the World's Fair—in Chicago staged a reenactment of Columbus's arrival. Buffalo Bill Cody invited 100 Lakota Sioux from Pine Ridge, Standing Rock, and Rosebud reservations to witness the ceremonies in full regalia. And 12 of them played the roles of a "welcoming party" of Arawak Indians.

1942: Samuel Eliot Morrison

Samuel Eliot Morrison championed the patriotic perspective of Columbus as the "first American." "Never again may mortal men hope to recapture the amazement, the wonder, the delight of those October days in 1492 when the New World gracefully yielded her virginity to the conquering Castilians To the people of this New World, pagans expecting short and brutish lives, void of hope for any future, had come the Christian vision of a merciful God and a glorious heaven." (Samuel Eliot Morrison, *Admiral of the Ocean Sea: A Life of Christopher Columbus* [Little, Brown and Company, 1942]: 113.)

1973: Alfred Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492*

In his 1973 book, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492*, Alfred Crosby presented an entirely different perspective on the significance of Columbus's voyages: their global impact and their role in world history.

1992: Quincentennial Celebrations

Quincentennial celebrations planned for October 12, 1992 quickly became arenas where the past was fiercely contested:

About 20,000 Mexicans, many dressed in bright Indian costumes, filled the central plaza Monday to mourn the deaths of millions of Indians in the 500 years since the Spanish arrived in the New World.

In Columbus, Ohio, the largest city in the world named for the explorer, only about two blocks separated the opposing viewpoints.

Philadelphia police say protesters dressed in traditional Native American garb tossed red paint Sunday at a new monument honoring Christopher Columbus. (<http://faculty.smu.edu/twalker/protest4.htm>)

Notes
