

Speaking Stones: Oral tradition as provenance for the memorial stelae in Gujarat

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Anthropological field-work in rural settlements on the west coast of India unravels the close connection between lived experiences, spaces and objects. These “inalienable possessions”, in the words of Annette Weiner, help reconstruct the past through the supplement of oral traditions. Following this vein, the paper attempts at meshing together the material culture and oral histories in establishing the provenance for the plethora of memorials in the state of Gujarat. The memorial stelae commemorating deceased heroes of war and their wives and companions continue to form an indivisible aspect of cultural landscape, often displayed at the museums as artefacts. These memorial stones carry with them several background stories, source literature transmitted orally; elevating their status as cultural motifs. The paper attempts at creating a niche for the oral tradition as authenticating the continued tradition around the memorial stones in Gujarat. Field observations from 2014-2016 and notes from researches in Gujarat from 1985 onwards enabled the study of patterns in oral preservation of literature as sources for the tradition and specifics of the rendering of the stelae, along with the modern appropriation of the tradition. The paper speaks to all these levels of interaction and the making of an identity for the memorial stones unique to the state of Gujarat. With numerous social factors at play, a closer look at the continued tradition involving the memorial stones uncovers the nuances of re-enactment of the age-old traditional and cultural elements indispensable for the study of culture, with Gujarat as the case example.