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### Theory of “Cultural Memory” by J. Assmann and Reflection of Multiculturalism: Myth, Memory and Remembrance in Cultures of “Axial Age”

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**Abstract.** The paper discusses various aspects of the concept of “cultural memory” coined by Jan Assmann and related both to the problem of determining the categories of culture that became the first objects of philosophical reflection in the era of the Axial Age and to the issues of the modern crisis of the ideology of globalism and multiculturalism. Using the example of some categories of an archaic myth that have not lost their cultural and social relevance at present, the variability of the genesis of philosophy in various civilizations of the epoch of the “Axial Age” is demonstrated — both those in which it arises as an independent form of worldview and those where this process stops at the stage of a highly speculative myth. Special attention is paid to the cultural and social aspects of memory and recollection of the past as forms of spiritual “resistance” to external cultural influences and the preservation of religious and ethnic identity, which is equally relevant both during the genesis of philosophy and in modern post-industrial society during the crisis of globalist ideology and the philosophy of multiculturalism.

**Keywords:** philosophy, axial age, multiculturalism, globalism

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## Introduction

The concept of “cultural memory”, which has been actively developed by the German Egyptologist and cultural scientist Jan Assmann and his wife Aleida Assmann for almost the last four decades, does not need any other introduction. Its widespread dissemination in recent years in Western philosophical and cultural thought is mainly due not so much to studies in comparative culture, religious studies, and classical Orientalism as to the crisis of the philosophy and methodology of multiculturalism. The surge in various radical conceptions — political and philosophical — primarily arises as a reaction to the many questions to which the philosophy of multiculturalism, for various reasons, needs to provide adequate answers. It is as one of its possible alternatives that the methodology of the German researcher has been mentioned more and more often in recent years — rightly so, although we should not forget that its authentic and original application was primarily limited to the field of classical cultural studies and Orientalism, many areas of which are also of direct interest to the historian of philosophy.

### Primitive Myth: Cultural and Social Functions

It is well known that Jan Assmann’s methodology in the field of “cultural memory” theory goes back to the ideas of the French philosopher and sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1877—1945) [1]. Like his predecessor, J. Assmann believes that human memory as a cultural phenomenon is always socially conditioned. Memory as a basis of human history and culture can never be solely individual. It must also be collective [2. P. 50—69]. The German researcher identifies two primary forms of memory about the past: historical memory and cultural memory playing the main act in his methodological constructions. In Assmann’s opinion, suppose historical memory can equally effectively fulfill its role in society in its individual and collective forms. In that case, the realization of the forms of cultural memory is almost always collective. The first of them — *justifying* — consists in substantiating the events of the present utilizing an account of the events of the distant past that led to the present state of the universe and human society. The second is the *contrasting* myth function.

Myth is the most critical element of collective cultural memory in any ancient society. The primitive myth is always a narrative or story with a pronounced worldview orientation. With the help of myth, ancient man, for the first time in history, tries to answer fundamental questions which, in the future, become subjects of arising philosophical discourse (origin of the world and humans, meaning of life, nature of good and evil). However, at the same time, in any ancient society, myth is also a basic form of historical memory. According to Assmann, myth in any

ancient culture always performs two functions [2. P. 83—88]. This means that in all ancient cultures, myths, according to Assmann, always sharply contrast the past, on the one hand, and the present and future, on the other. The past in the earliest forms of mythmaking is always the “Golden Age,” the sacred age of creation when the gods still walked the Earth and universal harmony reigned. However, then the world changes and enmity begins, eventually leading to a rift between the gods and man, with the consequent appearance of evil, death, disease, and misfortune. The gods no longer intervene beneficially in the affairs of men, and the latter, in turn, make no attempt to maintain the former norms of religiosity and piety, thus finally losing touch with them. To restore this lost harmony, a human being tries to reproduce past events through various religious rituals, cults, and sacrifices to the gods. The desire to return to these lost ideals determines the cyclic nature of the notion of time in the archaic myth: it is always an attempt to “eternal return” to the past, the sacred time of creation. At the same time, within the framework of historical memory, unlike cultural memory, the perception of time by ancient man may, according to Assmann, have not only cyclic but also linear character — first, because, as it was mentioned earlier, historical memory in ancient societies may, apart from the collective, have an individual character.

Such an interpretation of the mechanism of mythological consciousness is invariably based on memory as a reference to the past. Thus, primitive myth forms an idea of the nature of time and historical consciousness, which, like cultural memory, can sometimes be based on collective memory. In this aspect, archaic myth is directly opposite to the philosophical worldview, which is based primarily on an individual-reflexive perception of the world and categories of culture. It is this peculiarity of the primitive myth that contrasts very sharply with the nascent philosophy, as, for example, it is expressed in Karl Jaspers’ concept of the Axial Age [3]. Note, however, that despite its close connection with the collective historical consciousness, the phenomenon of “cultural memory” in the ancient cultures of the Axial Age gradually begins to be closely associated with the formation of the spiritual culture of not only the social group but also of the individual. The historical forms of “cultural memory” of the 2nd-1st millennium B.C. expressed, first of all, in the early types of analytics of the primitive myth, though not always critical yet (the most important place among them undoubtedly belongs to the phenomenon of several Eastern Mediterranean cultures, which we denote by the term “speculative theology” [4]), and, at this time, have an exclusively collective character. At the same time, according to J. Assmann himself, both in the “Axial Age” society and in modern society, the memory of the past can also act as a peculiar act of resistance, an expression of man’s internal rejection of the spiritual values that exist at present and are imposed on him from outside, as well as the sociopolitical attitudes (including religious ones) that are alien to him. Of course, this phenomenon is characteristic of ancient cultures during the “Axial Age” (900—200 B.C.), but one can also find earlier cases of such spiritual resistance. For instance, in the religion of Ancient Egypt in the 13<sup>th</sup> century B.C., the tradition of

“personal piety” (J.H. Breasted’s term [5. P. 320—327]) appeared, which replaced traditional Egyptian ideas of Maat, a just world order embodied in a centralized state system headed by a king and based on the principles of posthumous retribution and social solidarity during life. However, the painful events of the Amarna religious upheaval (14<sup>th</sup> century B.C.) significantly shook these ideas, and they were promptly replaced by a new moral attitude, according to which one is responsible for his actions, not the king, his relatives, or his superior, but exclusively and directly to God. This eventually led the Egyptian culture to a deep inner crisis when, according to J. Assmann, the traditional cyclic perception of time for the primitive myth gradually changed to the linear one, more familiar to the worldview of modern man [6. P. 201—212].

From our point of view, the cultural phenomenon of memory mentioned repeatedly by J. Assmann (the German researcher who realizes this concept primarily through the functions of “remembering culture”) is vital for understanding the modern crisis of the ideals of globalism. It is the loss of such memory and, therefore, the sense of belonging to a certain cultural and/or ethnic tradition that is one of the reasons for resistance to the principles of multiculturalism and globalism, which inevitably blur these cultural and historical boundaries. For the man of modern post-industrial society and the man of the “Axial Age,” the existence of memories of the past (both individual, contained in historical memory, and collective, realized through cultural memory) is vital for the preservation of his spiritual identity.

### **Cultural Identity: Reflection, Self-Consciousness, and Solidarity**

Following C. Lévi-Strauss [7], J. Assmann interprets the concept of identity primarily as the result of a person’s reflection, his previously unconscious, but at a certain point in time, has become a necessary representation of himself and his place in the world. Like forms of historical memory of the past, this self-consciousness can be either individual or collective. Thus, collective self-consciousness is one of the sources of ethnogenesis, but it can never exist without individual, personal self-consciousness. According to Assmann, the mechanisms of self-consciousness (both individual and collective) are the basis of cultural identity. Possessing such an identity in ancient cultures almost always led to the awareness of a particular ethnic group, nation, or people of its characteristics. These distinctive features set it apart from other social groups. Sometimes it led to the idea of the “uniqueness” or “chosenness” of this or that ethnic or social group. Ancient Egyptians, e.g., due to some objective geographical factors, at the dawn of the dynastic era (the turn of the 4<sup>th</sup>—3<sup>rd</sup> millennium B.C.) perceived themselves as a unique people inhabiting the fertile lands of the Nile Valley and Delta and engaged in sedentary forms of agriculture and cattle breeding, in contrast to the “Asians”, “archers” and “vile Nubians” who roamed the desert sands and were engaged in hunting and gathering. There was even a stable expression in the Egyptian language to designate them, literally translated as “those on the sand.” According to J. Assmann, the result of

such sociocultural identity is either national identity (if it is based on the mechanisms of “vertical solidarity” covering the whole society) or nationalism (if it is based on the mechanisms of “horizontal solidarity” within separate social groups). The latter, in both ancient and modern cultures, often emerges precisely because of the fear of losing one’s own cultural identity, of dissolving into other nations or ethnic groups.

The opinion of the German researcher is quite interesting that the formation of the mechanisms of cultural identity has always been closely connected with the notion of the border, acting as a category of culture and simultaneously as a subject of mythological and, later, philosophical reflection. For instance, in the Egyptian language, the nouns “land” (*ta*) and “boundary” (*tash*) are consonant and have a common root. The political organization of the state inevitably arises through the mechanisms of establishing and then controlling its borders. This is equally characteristic of both ancient and modern societies. That is why in the present era of globalism with its gradual “blurring,” disappearance of cultural and geographical borders, the phenomenon mentioned by J. Assmann. The phenomenon of “resistance” as a form of spiritual self-expression and preservation of cultural and political identity is very relevant. According to Assmann, cultural identity was precisely the basis of a peculiar philosophy of history in the cultures of the “Axial Age,” such as Egypt, Israel, Greece, and Mesopotamia [8. P. 76—89]. The close connection with the notion of the border as a cultural category (both in the direct (physical) and figurative sense) is also significant. Thus, a separate ethnic community and the state that emerged from it may realize its economic, political, and cultural-religious tasks (sometimes elevated to the rank of moral values) either through the ongoing preservation of its borders (e.g., under the aggressive pressure of hostile peoples and states) or, on the contrary, in their gradual expansion through aggressive military policies and conquests. A striking example of the second type is the idea of moral justification of war, which emerged in Egyptian ethics and royal ideology during the New Kingdom era (16<sup>th</sup> century B.C.). Here the king who sets out with an army on conquest or “expedition” (*ujit*) is invariably portrayed as the guardian of the Maat — the sacred and just world order — and the subdued peoples are its violators, who must either be destroyed or conquered, deprived of their borders and statehood. Thus, the invasion of the Egyptian army in Nubia, Syria, or Palestine is interpreted not as an act of unprovoked aggression but as part of the king’s duty to maintain the proper and just world order [9. P. 79—82]. We should add that such actions were also a mechanism of realization by an ethnic group (in this case, the Egyptians) of its own cultural identity, carried out at the religious and military-political levels.

### **“Hot” and “Cold” Options for Culture in Axial Age Civilizations and Modern Society**

From the works of C. Lévi-Strauss, J. Assmann borrows another methodological technique that is equally promising for studies of ancient and

modern cultures. It is their division into “hot” and “cold” from the point of view of the attitude to the problem of historical and cultural continuity. “Cold” culture is very conservative and always fiercely resists any innovations and external influence trying to maintain an unchanging set of categories and religious, social, and political values. On the contrary, “hot” cultures are always open to change, as well as external communication and linguistic borrowings; they are pretty flexible in shaping their political, social, and religious values. This does not mean, however, that cultures of this type do not have a particular “core” at all, that is, a small but stable set of unchanging values and categories not subject to these influences. After all, if such a “core” did not exist, all these cultures would have long ago lost their identity, becoming part of some other cultures and civilizations, which, due to various factors, had a strong influence on them. The most distinctive ancient culture of the “cold” type is Ancient Egypt and the “hot” — Ancient Greece.

According to the German researcher, one of the crucial features of the “cold” type culture is the presence of strong centralized power. It should be noted, of course, that not all ancient civilizations fully meet these criteria, representing “refined” examples of one or the other type. Many other ancient cultures (apart from Egypt and Greece) contain elements of both “hot” and “cold” options. As far as modern societies are concerned, it is the cultures whose structure and categories are dominated by “cold” type elements that prove the most stubborn in their rejection of globalist ideology, while the cultures dominated by “hot” type elements, on the contrary, are more receptive to globalist values and ideals. As the most critical social mechanism of cultural continuity, equally effective both in the era of “axial time” and the current post-industrial civilization, J. Assmann calls the combined efforts of political and/or religious authorities to preserve the collective historical memory in society. The key element is the concept of justice as a cultural category and legal norm.

The nature of ideas about justice in ancient cultures varies. In particular, in the “cold” apparatus of cultural categories of Ancient Egypt, the notions of justice were expressed in the aforementioned complex concept of the “Maat” embodied in the image of the goddess of truth and justice of the same name. Maat was understood as the true and just world order established by the Sun-God during the world’s creation, a particular case of which was the earthly state headed by the king, the “little Sun.” As the primary guardian of this order, the king ensured the preservation of traditional political and moral norms based on the reproduction and maintenance of the laws established by the gods in the primordial past. Thus, a cultural and political tradition was formed, characterized by conservatism and aversion to political, religious, and cultural innovations.

On the contrary, the notions of justice were somewhat different in Ancient Greece, which the German researcher considers the most representative of the characteristics of the “hot” type of cultural categories. The Greek goddess Dike, who embodied the ideas of justice, appears in ancient mythology primarily as

punishing justice. The implementation of justice and the realization of the principles of justice in Greek political practice, already from the archaic period, was traditionally interpreted not so much as a benefit or reward for law-abiding citizens but primarily as punishment for lawbreakers [10]. At the same time, the ideas about the nature of justice (which, along with wisdom, courage, and moderation, was traditionally among the four “classical” virtues of antiquity) in Greek culture were not so closely connected with the doctrine of the functions and duties of a ruler as in Egyptian religion and political ethics, which largely led to the absence of a strong centralized authority in a significant number of Greek polities of the Archaic period. The formation and preservation of cultural values and traditions in the Greek civilizational space were always carried out in different ways, each of which depended mainly on the peculiarities of the political system of a particular polis. Together with the peculiarities of religion, this factor led to considerable openness of Greek culture to external influences, thanks to which it was considerably transformed during the whole period of its existence, and, as a consequence of this process, ancient philosophy was also transformed (in particular, the Socratic turn of the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. from the study of nature to the theme of man). At the same time, the political mechanisms of implementing cultural continuity in the Greek cultural space up to the onset of Hellenism (4<sup>th</sup> century B.C.) were much less active than in Egypt.

The theory of “hot” and “cold” options in the mechanisms of formation of categories and values of culture proposed by J. Assmann is still relevant today. Under the conditions of constantly increasing intercultural communication of modern post-industrial society with giving the achievements of a particular culture in the field of technology, social sciences, education, and interdisciplinary research the status of shared cultural heritage, it is the “cold” culture, based on traditional values, which are its unchangeable core, that acts as the primary mechanism of resistance to globalist tendencies and loss of cultural identity. It is important to emphasize that the presence of such fundamental values and/or categories, which guarantee the self-sufficient existence of cultural tradition, does not mean that this culture is closed to external interaction. A tradition rooted in centuries-old moral, religious, and political values may be partially changed during historical evolution under the influence of external factors, but its inner core always remains unchanged. The conservatism of this or that cultural tradition of the “cold” type does not necessarily mean pronounced hostility to everything new — it only serves as a kind of “protective mechanism” to preserve the fundamental values of this culture. Only when these basic values are threatened by absolute destruction or fundamental transformation (both as a result of forced replacement by others and through slow but inevitable erosion) does this mechanism acquire a pronounced “militant” character — as, for example, happened in Egyptian religion and culture of the Late Period (9<sup>th</sup>—5<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C.) with its pronounced tendency to archaize, sometimes quite radically.

## Conclusion

Nowadays, when the problematic nature of many ideas and values of the multiculturalist model can be considered a *fait accompli*, the quest for searching for their possible alternatives increasingly attracts the attention of philosophers and cultural and political scientists. It is such an alternative that the concept of “cultural memory” by J. Assmann has been considered quite often in the last three decades. The historical continuity of the fundamental categories of culture, the need for which in the post-industrial era is acutely felt by many individuals as well as social and ethnic groups, is now increasingly seen as a guarantee of the preservation of fundamental spiritual values, that act simultaneously as the most important forms of cultural and political identity for both an individual and a social group. Both in the epoch of the Axial Age and at present, the critical role in the mechanisms of translation and preservation of these values is played by written culture (which J. Assmann himself, let us recall, clearly separates from the culture of “remembering,” which underlies memory as a psychophysiological and cultural phenomenon). It is not a coincidence that in the culture of Ancient Egypt throughout its existence, we see the presence of two types of culture simultaneously: “high” culture (within which the preservation and translation of political, religious, and moral values take place) and “low” culture (everyday, mass culture). The first is expressed in classical hieroglyphic writing, which is invariably used in official royal and temple inscriptions.

In contrast, the second is expressed in *hieratic* (later transformed into *Demotic*), which was most often used in composing household and economic documents, as well as “school” copies of classical texts. Later, a similar phenomenon was repeatedly observed at different stages of the existence of both Western and Eastern civilizations. Both in the Axial Age and the contemporary post-industrial era, philosophy emerges and develops as a reflection of the current categories of culture, both “high” and “low”. Despite the massive difference in the worldviews of ancient and modern man, the presence of such a set of fundamental spiritual values is vital both for the man of the Axial Age and for the man of modern post-industrial society, in which philosophy, as a reflection of cultural categories, continues to be an essential form of realization of spiritual and ethnic identity.

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## Теория «культурной памяти» Я. Ассмана и рефлексия мультикультурализма: миф, память и воспоминание в культурах «осевого времени»

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**Аннотация.** В статье рассматриваются различные аспекты концепции «культурной памяти» Я. Ассмана, связанные как с проблемой определения категорий культуры, ставших первыми объектами философской рефлексии в эпоху «осевого времени», так и с вопросами современного кризиса идеологии глобализма и мультикультурализма. На примере ряда категорий архаического мифа, не утративших своей культурной и социальной актуальности в настоящее время, демонстрируется вариативность процесса генезиса философии в различных цивилизациях эпохи «осевого времени» — как тех, в которых она возникает в качестве самостоятельной формы мировоззрения, так и тех, где этот процесс останавливается на стадии высокоспекулятивного мифа. Отдельное внимание уделено культурным и социальным аспектам памяти и воспоминания о прошлом как форм духовного «сопротивления» внешним культурным влияниям и сохранения религиозной и этнической идентичности, что оказывается одинаково актуальным как в период генезиса философии, так и в современном постиндустриальном обществе времён кризиса глобалистской идеологии и философии мультикультурализма.

**Ключевые слова:** осевое время, мультикультурализм, глобализм

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