

## What is Oral Tradition?

Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México

Lecture 1

Monday, September 21, 2009

John Miles Foley

First of five lectures sponsored by the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México

I. Range of answers/opinions: two extremes with many options between them

A. **Inclusive pole**: *all spoken discourse*, regardless of

- social context (synchronic background, diachronic roots)
- medium of presentation/preservation (living performance > silent text)
- genre (the *kind* of discourse; usually a recognized type)
- function (how the OT actually serves its constituency)
- language/dialect/idiolect

B. **Exclusive pole**: *living instance of an accepted verbal activity*, with various conditions

- no oral-derived texts, even if that is all that survives
  - ++ thus ancient and medieval texts are eliminated
  - ++ likewise much Native American material, for example
- no “unnaturally” recorded instances
  - ++ performance context must be natural (but what is “natural”?)
  - ++ question of feasibility of recording
  - ++ range of performance arenas for any OT
- no unapproved genres
  - ++ many times this eliminates all genres that failed to “graduate” to textual tradition
  - ++ for example: epic usually approved, recipes not approved
- no function outside of entertainment and instruction
  - ++ eliminates genealogies, healing charms, etc.

II. My goal in this presentation: to be as **inclusive** and comparative as possible

A. to deconstruct the “orality-versus-literacy” argument

- OT and texts interact in myriad and interesting ways
- **within the same person as well as the same social group**
- example: transitions in the British Middle Ages (Amodio 2005)
- example: the Old English variant texts of *Cædmon’s Hymn*
  - \*\* O’Brien O’Keeffe 1990: “formulaic reading” by scribes
- example: Nikola Vujnović’s “resinging” of Halil Bajgorić’s performance of the *Ženidba Bećirbega Mustajbegova*

B. to foster as realistic an understanding of OT as possible

- because OT dwarfs written “literature” in size and diversity
- comparing OTs is thus a richer experience than comparing literatures

C. to help understand the multiple social functions of OT

- so many more functions than literature supports

### III. A *historical* perspective: media technologies and our species-year

- 100,000 years mapped onto an annual calendar
- writing proves to be an extremely recent invention

<u>Invention</u>	<u>Date (floruit)</u>	<u>Day</u>	<u>Species-date</u>
Numeracy (Middle Eastern tokens)	8000 BCE	328	November 22
Egyptian script traditions	3200 BCE	346	December 10
Mesopotamian cuneiform	3100 BCE	346	December 10
Semitic scripts	2000 BCE	350	December 14
Phoenician script	1200 BCE	353	December 17
Greek alphabet	775 BCE	355	December 19
Chinese printing technology	750 CE	360	December 24
Gutenberg's printing press	1450 CE	363	December 27
Typewriter (C. L. Scholes)	1867 CE	365	12:00 on 12/31
Internet	1997 CE	365	23:44 on 12/31

#### *Summary*

Homo sapiens spent 11+ months of our species-year (95% of our existence) without writing of any kind.

- but societies were formed and maintained
- knowledge was transmitted, rituals were conducted, etc.
- how? an alternate communications technology (OT) was in place

### IV. A *contemporary* perspective: oral traditions around the world today

#### A. UNESCO & its program on Intangible Cultural Heritage

1. Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity (2001, 2003, 2005) – more than 100 examples worldwide

<http://www.unesco.org/culture/intangible-heritage/>

oral traditions & expressions, traditional performing arts, etc.

2. New programs (instead of the Masterpieces program)

-- enormous data-base & archive of ICH to be established

-- handbooks for collecting and preserving ICH (incl. one on OT)

#### B. A few examples of diversity in OT (from thousands of possibilities)

-- Special issues of the journal *Oral Tradition* (18, 1-2)

++ Two questions posed to 80+ experts

\*\* *What is OT in your area?*

\*\* *What are the next few challenges in your area?*

-- China

++ Suzhou *tanci* tales performed in story-houses (Bender 2003)

++ 55 official minorities with OTs (Institute of Ethnic Literatures, CASS)

\*\* [http://iel.cass.cn/english/IEL\\_HomePage\\_Eng.asp](http://iel.cass.cn/english/IEL_HomePage_Eng.asp)

++ Chinese special issue of *Oral Tradition* (16, ii [2001])

-- Africa

++ Xhosa and Zulu praise-poetry (tribal > political focus)

\*\* Opland 1983, 1998; Kaschula 1995, 2000

++ ethnobotanical information from S. A. traditional healers

\*\* Univ. of Missouri/Univ. of Western Cape project

\*\* to treat AIDS, cervical cancer, other diseases

++ West African epics of Mwindo and Son-Jara

\*\* Biebuyck 1989 and Johnson et al. 2003

- ++ African novels' debt to OT – indigenous & colonial forms
  - \*\* Balogun 1995, 1997; Obiechina 1992
- ++ General overview: Okpewho 1992
- Australian Aboriginal OTs
  - \*\* Songlines / navigational maps: Chatwin 1988
- South Pacific
  - ++ Cook Islands (Siikala 2005)
  - ++ various other South Pacific locales (Finnegan and Orbell 1995)
- Basque country (northern Spain & southern France)
  - ++ contest poetry, *bertsolaritza*
    - \*\* Garzia et al. 2001, Armistead and Zulaika 2005
    - \*\* Special issue of *Oral Tradition* in 2007
      - <http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/22ii>
    - \*\* National championship every 4 years
      - <http://www.oraltradition.org/articles/2006/01/03/basque-oral-poetry-championship>
  - ++ more than 1000 “*bertso* dinners” every year
  - ++ Bertsozale Elkartea organization
    - \*\* <http://www.bertsozale.com/english/index.php>
- India
  - ++ *Siri Epic* (Honko 1998, Honko et al. 1998a, b)
    - \*\* multiple genres surrounding religious ritual
    - \*\* Gopala Naika, priest & epic singer
  - ++ *Pabuji Epic* (Smith 1991)
    - \*\* role of *par* in performance (immanent story)
  - ++ South Asian women's OTs
    - \*\* Special issue of *Oral Tradition*, 1997
    - \*\* <http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/12i>
- Central Asian oral epic
  - ++ Altay (Harvilahti 2003)
  - ++ general Turkic, including Kirghiz epic (Reichl 1992)
- Judeo-Christian bible
  - ++ Old Testament: Niditch 1996, Jaffee 2001
  - ++ New Testament: Kelber 1983/1997, Horsley and Draper 1999
- Arabic oral traditions
  - ++ Islamic and pre-Islamic
  - ++ Special issue of *Oral Tradition*, 1989
    - <http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/4i-ii>
  - ++ Contemporary Bani Hilal epic (Reynolds 1995)
- Former Yugoslavia
  - ++ epic, lyric, genealogy, charm, lament, folktale
  - ++ all with different social functions
  - ++ to be covered in detail during Lecture # 3
- Central America
  - ++ Oral stories from Guatemala (Kaqchikel and Spanish)
  - ++ Bilingual OT: Hermano Pedro (Morrissey & Canales 1996)

-- North America

- ++ African American genres: toast (Fine 1994), rap (Pihel 1996), blues (Titon 1994), folk preaching (Rosenberg 1988)
- ++ Native American genres: tales, myths
  - \*\* Zuni people: Tedlock 1999
- ++ Anglo-American ballads (McCarthy 1990)
- ++ folktales from various ethnic groups
  - \*\* “Jack” tales and informants (McCarthy 1994)
- ++ slam poetry (roots in “beat” poetry / invented in 1985)
  - \*\* contest genre, social criticism
  - \*\* national championship versus club activities
  - \*\* <http://www.poetryslam.com/>

V. An open-ended model for oral tradition: *composition, performance, and reception*

A. a very flexible, interactive system of four categories

B. no implied evolution or hierarchy

C. individual OTs may fit more than one category and/or shift among them

<u>Category</u>	<u>Composition</u>	<u>Performance</u>	<u>Reception</u>	<u>Example</u>
<i>Oral performance</i>	Oral	Oral	Aural	Tibetan paper-singer
<i>Voiced texts</i>	Written	Oral	Aural	slam poetry
<i>Voices from the past</i>	O/W	O/W	A/W	Homer’s <i>Odyssey</i>
<i>Written oral tradition</i>	Written	Written	Silent reading	Bishop Njegoš

Another way to look at the four categories:

<i>Oral performance</i>	Composing IN performance
<i>Voiced texts</i>	Composing FOR performance
<i>Voices from the past</i>	Composing ALONGSIDE performance
<i>Written oral tradition</i>	Composing for NON-performance

VI. Characteristics of oral traditions (more detail in lecture # 4 on approaches)

A. “dedicated” register of language / way of speaking

-- different in some way(s) from everyday speech

-- identifying features may include (among others)

++ specific meter and/or melody

++ dialect(s)

++ archaism(s) of lexicon or grammar

++ kinesic signals (gestures, facial expressions)

-- special registers are narrow-spectrum tools

++ they perform one function extremely well

++ broad-spectrum languages perform many functions,  
but with less power and economy

B. typical levels of structure in a register (more details in lecture # 4)

-- Parry-Lord *formula, type-scene, story-pattern*

-- Richard Bauman’s *keys to performance*

-- Dell Hymes’ *verse, line, scene, act, etc.*

### C. idiomatic meaning of registers

- specialized sign linked to specialized meaning
  - ++ Homer -  $\chi\lambda\omega\rho\omicron\nu\ \delta\acute{\epsilon}\omicron\varsigma$ : “green fear” > “supernatural fear”
  - ++ South Slavic epic – *kukavica crna*: “black cuckoo” > “widow”

### D. Words versus “words” in oral traditions

- South Slavic *guslari* identify *reči* as “units of utterance”
  - ++ metrical line-part or whole line (also multiple linked lines)
  - ++ typical scene or speech
  - ++ entire song/performance
- Interviews with the Parry-Lord team member Nikola Vujnović
  - ++ two examples drawn from many similar conversations

#### Ibro Bašić

NV: But what is a *reč*? What is a *reč*? Tell me.

IB: An utterance (*besjeda*).

NV: An utterance?

IB: Yes, an utterance; that’s a *reč*, just like when I say to you now, “Is that a book, Nikola?” “Is that a coffeepot, Nikola?” There you go, that’s a *reč*.

NV: What is, let’s say, a single *reč* in a song? Tell me a single *reč* from a song.

IB: This is one, like this, let’s say; this is a *reč*: “Mujo of Kladuša arose early, / At the top of the slender, well-built tower” (“Podranijo od Kladuše Mujo, / Na vrh tanke načinjene kule”).

NV: But these are poetic lines (*stihovi*).

IB: Eh, that’s how it goes with us (*kod nas*, implying the singers); it’s otherwise with you, but that’s how it’s said with us.

#### Salko Morić

NV: But let’s say . . . tell us a single *reč*, so I can see what it is. What’s a *reč* so I can hear it? For example, “He/she was drinking wine” (“Pije vino”) – is that a *reč*?

SM: Yes.

NV: This is also a *reč*?

SM: Yes.

NV: So then is “Salko,” “Salko,” is that a *reč*?

SM: Yes.

NV: It too?

SM: Uh-huh.

NV: But what would this be? – “At Udbina in a drinking tavern / Sat the aghas, they were drinking wine one after another” (“Na hUdbini u pjanoi mehani / Sjede age, redom piju vino”). What’s that?

SM: “All together they were drinking wine one after another” (“Svi ukupno redom piju vino”).

NV: So you’re saying it’s a *reč*, then?

SM: It’s also a *reč*, yes.

- compare Homeric Greek *epos* and *muthos*

- compare Anglo-Saxon *word*

- compare Mongolian “mouth-word”

## VII. Summary for “What is Oral Tradition?”

A. *Caveat*: OT = a communications medium so vast, diverse, and omnipresent that it will always resist easy or final definition, no matter how hard we try

B. Five generalizations (to be narrowed by specialists within specific fields)

1. OT is *homo sapiens*’ oldest thought-technology

- for 95% of our existence it was the only such technology

- it supported all aspects of social activity over time

2. OT is still the most pervasive technology worldwide
  - if we look outside the developed world
  - if we take account of OT's presence in developed societies as well
3. OT far surpasses written and printed literature
  - in amount
  - in diversity of contents
  - in diversity of functions
4. OT can be understood systematically (not reduced!) via a 4-part model
 

<i>Oral performance</i>	Composing IN performance
<i>Voiced texts</i>	Composing FOR performance
<i>Voices from the past</i>	Composing ALONGSIDE performance
<i>Written oral tradition</i>	Composing for NON-performance

  - the factors of *performance* and *tradition* are fundamental
    - ++ more on these concepts in lecture # 4
    - ++ OT best studied and represented digitally; lecture # 5
5. Many OTs use "words" instead of words
  - larger "units of utterance": < line > entire performance
  - with idiomatic meanings (e.g. "black" + "cuckoo" = "widow")

Next time (lecture # 2; Tuesday, September 22): *Epics from Oral Tradition*

## Resources

- Amodio, Mark C. 2005. *Writing the Oral Tradition: Oral Poetics and Literate Culture in Medieval England*. Poetics of Orality and Literacy, vol. 1. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Armistead, Samuel G. and Joseba Zulaika. 2005. Eds., *Voicing the Moment: Improvised Oral Poetry and the Basque Tradition*. Reno: Center for Basque Studies, University of Nevada-Reno.
- Balogun, F. Odun. 1995. "Matigari: An African Novel as Oral Performance." *Oral Tradition*, 10: 129-64.
- . 1997. *Ngugi and African Post-Colonial Narrative: The Novel as Oral Narrative in Multi-Genre Performance*. Quebec: World Heritage Press.
- Bender, Mark. 2003. *Plum and Bamboo: China's Suzhou Chantefable Tradition*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Biebuyck, Daniel and Kahombo C. Mateene. 1989. Eds., *The Mwindo Epic from the Banyanga*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press. Rev. ed.
- Chatwin, Bruce. 1988. *The Songlines*. New York: Penguin.
- Fine, Elizabeth. 1994. *The Folklore Text: From Performance to Print*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. Orig. ed. 1984.
- Finnegan, Ruth and Margaret Orbell. 1995. Eds., *South Pacific Oral Traditions*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Foley, John Miles. 1988. *The Theory of Oral Composition: History and Methodology*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. Rpt. 1992.
- . 1990. *Traditional Oral Epic: The Odyssey, Beowulf, and the Serbo-Croatian Return Song*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press. Rpt. 1993.
- . 1991. *Immanent Art: From Structure to Meaning in Traditional Oral Epic*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. Rev. ed. forthcoming from the University of Notre Dame Press.
- . 1995. *The Singer of Tales in Performance*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

- , 1998. Ed., *Teaching Oral Traditions*. New York: Modern Language Association. Rpt. 2000.
- , 1999. *Homer's Traditional Art*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- , 2002. *How to Read an Oral Poem*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press. eCompanion at [www.oraltradition.org/hrop](http://www.oraltradition.org/hrop).
- , 2004. Ed. and trans., *The Wedding of Mustajbey's Son Bećirbey as Performed by Halil Bajgorić*. Folklore Fellows Communications, 283. Academia Scientiarum Fennica. eEdition at [www.oraltradition.org/zbm](http://www.oraltradition.org/zbm).
- Garzia, Joxerra, Andoni Egaña, and Jon Sarasua. 2001. *The Art of Bertsolaritza: Improvised Basque Verse Singing*. Donostia: Bertsozale Elkartea.
- Harvilahti, Lauri. 2003. *The Holy Mountain: Studies on Upper Altay Oral Poetry*. With the collaboration of Zoja S. Kazgačeva. Folklore Fellows Communications, 282. Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica.
- Honko, Lauri. 1998. *Textualising the Siri Epic*. Folklore Fellows Communications, 264. Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica.
- , with Chinnappa Gowda, Anneli Honko, and Viveka Rai. 1998a, b. Eds. and trans., *The Siri Epic as Performed by Gopala Naika*. Parts I-II. Folklore Fellows Communications, 265-66. Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica.
- Horsley, Richard A. with Jonathan A. Draper. 1999. *Whoever Hears You Hears Me: Prophets, Performance, and Tradition in Q*. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International.
- Jaffee, Martin. 2001. *Torah in the Mouth: Writing and Oral Tradition in Palestinian Judaism 200 BCE-400 CE*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Johnson, John William, Fa-Digi Sisoko, and Charles S. Bird. 2003. Eds., *Son-Jara: The Mande Epic*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Kaschula, Russell H. 1995. "Mandela Comes Home: The Poets' Perspective." *Oral Tradition*, 10: 91-110.
- , 2000. *The Bones of the Ancestors Are Shaking: Xhosa Oral Poetry in Context*. Cape Town: Juta Press.
- Kelber, Werner H. 1997. *The Oral and the Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and Q*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- McCarthy, William B. 1990. *The Ballad Matrix*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- , 1994. Ed., *Jack in Two Worlds: Contemporary North American Tellers and their Tales*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Morrissey, Jane Frances and Cristina Maria Canales. 1996. Eds. and trans., *Gracias, Matiox, Thanks, Hermano Pedro: A Trilingual Anthology of Guatemalan Oral Tradition*. New York: Garland.
- Niditch, Susan. 1996. *Oral World and Written Word*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Obiechina, Emmanuel. 1992. "Narrative Proverbs in the African Novel." *Oral Tradition* 7: 197-230.
- O'Keefe, Katherine O'Brien. 1990. *Visible Song: Transitional Literacy in Old English Verse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Okpewho, Isidore. 1992. *African Oral Literature: Backgrounds, Character, Continuity*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Opland, Jeff. 1983. *Xhosa Oral Poetry: Aspects of a Black South African Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- , 1998. *Xhosa Oral Poets and Poetry*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Oral Tradition*. A journal devoted exclusively to the world's oral traditions and related forms. Also available online and free at <http://journal.oraltradition.org>.
- Pihel, Erik. 1996. "A Purified Freestyle: Homer and Hip Hop." *Oral Tradition*, 11: 249-69.
- Reichl, Karl. 1992. *Turkic Oral Epic Poetry: Traditions, Forms, Poetic Structure*. New York: Garland.
- Reynolds, Dwight F. 1995. *Heroic Poets, Poetic Heroes: The Ethnography of Performance in an Arabic Oral Epic Tradition*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Rosenberg, Bruce A. 1988. *Can These Bones Live? The Art of the American Folk Preacher*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Siikala, Anna-Leena and Jukka Siikala. 2005. *Return to Culture: Oral Tradition and Society in the Southern Cook Islands*. Folklore Fellows Communications, 287. Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica.

- Smith, John D. 1991. Ed. and trans., *The Epic of Pabuji: A Study, Transcription, and Translation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 1999. *Finding the Center: The Art of the Zuni Storyteller*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. Orig. ed. 1972.
- Titon, Jeff Todd. 1994. *Early Downhome Blues: A Musical and Cultural Analysis*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. Orig. ed. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977.