What is Oral Tradition?

Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México

Lecture 1

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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/idiolcet

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 *Caedmon’s Hymn*
       ** O’Brien O’Keeffe 1990: “formulaic reading” by scribes
     -- example: Nikola Vujnović’s “resinging” of Halil Bajgorić’s performance of the Ženidba Bećirbegova 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

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

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
      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
      ++ Chinese special issue of Oral Tradition (16, ii [2001])
   -- Africa
      ++ Xhosa and Zulu praise-poetry (tribal > political focus)
      ++ 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
  ** National championship every 4 years
  http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/22ii
  ** http://www.oraltradition.org/articles/2006/01/03/basque-oral-poetry-championship
  ++ more than 1000 “bertso dinners” every year
  ++ Bertsozale Elkartea organization
-- 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
-- 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

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

Another way to look at the four categories:

- **Oral performance**: Composing IN performance
- **Voiced texts**: Composing FOR performance
- **Voices from the past**: Composing ALONGSIDE performance
- **Written oral tradition**: 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 - γλῶφον δέος: “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 rec? What is a rec? 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 rec?
SM: Yes.
NV: This is also a rec?
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
   *Oral performance* Composing IN performance
   *Voiced texts* Composing FOR performance
   *Voices from the past* Composing ALONGSIDE performance
   *Written oral tradition* 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


Oral Tradition. A journal devoted exclusively to the world’s oral traditions and related forms. Also available online and free at http://journal.oralltradition.org.


An oral tradition is the vehicle by which information is passed from one generation to the next in the absence of writing or a recording medium. In the days before near-universal literacy, bards would sing or chant their people’s stories. They employed various (mnemonic) techniques to aid both in their own memory and to help their listeners keep track of the story. This oral tradition was a way to keep the history or culture of the people alive, and since it was a form of storytelling, it was a popular form of entertainment.

**Overview**
The challenge of reconstructing the history of nonliterate or preliterate societies makes necessary the study and interpretation of oral traditions. Many such societies have gone to great extents to preserve and transmit the knowledge of their past in oral forms. The phrase oral traditions refers to folklore, legends, tales, taboos, and stories through which knowledge of the past is preserved and transmitted from one generation to another. Oral tradition is important in all societies, despite the reliance of some cultures on written records and accounts. These traditions account for the ways things are and often the way they should be, and assist people in educating the young and teaching important lessons about the past and about life. Because many oral traditions are highly structured and are told faithfully without alteration, they can be as reliable as other non-oral ways of recording and passing on experiences. Oral tradition is information passed down through the generations by word of mouth that is not written down. This includes historical and cultural traditions, literature and law. Explore some oral tradition examples like legends, proverbs, folktales, and customs. breaking a wishbone as examples of oral tradition. Oral Tradition Examples in Legends and Folklore. Legends and folklore can include stories and oral traditions from ancient times along with the newer urban legends that you might hear.