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CENTRE FOR BYZANTINE, OTTOMAN AND MODERN GREEK STUDIES
UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

What is Orality — if Anything?

RUTH FINNEGAN

'A challenging start to the Colloquium' was what the organiser asked for, in the form of a critique of one of its key terms. This is what this paper endeavours to supply. I suspect it has turned out not quite as provocative as the title sounds, but it does attempt to provide some critical assessment of, and background to, the much-discussed concept of 'orality', presented from the viewpoint of an anthropologist long interested in the study of oral literature and poetry. Most of the discussion will be in general terms, but I will illustrate my points from time to time by examples from my own fieldwork in West Africa.

'Orality', together with the adjectival 'oral', is a term now to be found quite widely in scholarly writing, not only in the classic study of Homeric texts (where it has of course been particularly influential, and where, I believe, I first consciously encountered it) but also across a whole range of disciplinary — and interdisciplinary — contexts. It appears in the work of historians, literary and linguistic scholars, folklorists, anthropologists, biblical scholars, and interdisciplinary specialists in a whole series of historical periods or geographical regions. Sometimes there are particular technical meanings to the terms — as, for example, in some of its uses by oral historians or, in a different way, by the oral-formulaic scholars — but in general it has been used as a way into new interpretations and approaches, whether drawing attention to new materials, not hitherto usually the subject of scholarly study, or to new questions about old material.

But what exactly *is* 'orality'? Before tackling that question directly let me start by looking at some features of the new interpretations and questions that the term has led to, and the way it has thus both increased and — sometimes — hindered our greater understanding. This should help to give some of the background, and illuminate our central question further.

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What, then, have been the benefits we have gained from using the concept of orality?

Perhaps the most immediate one to come to mind is the part it has played in widening our perceptions of the works of human literary imagination. It has helped to alert us to new material to study and appreciate. In my own case, for example (no doubt like many other humanist scholars), I grew up with the implicit conviction that written texts — and in particular of course the written texts of certain highly attested canons — were somehow the most proper subject of study, and that there was something 'real' and substantive about them not shared by the fleeting and contingent flow of spoken words (a familiar enough assumption in literary scholarship even now). The idea that there could be something justifiably called *oral* literature was at one point a mind-blowing idea (it is perhaps rather hard to recall this now, when the idea is — in some circles anyway — so easily accepted; but many, like me, may remember their first experience of that idea).

New doors into the appreciation of human culture have thus been opened for us by scholars working with the concept of oralness. This dates back further than is sometimes supposed. The term 'oral literature', for example, was already being used in the nineteenth century (e.g. Chatelain 1984:16) and was a key idea in the Chadwicks' great comparative work *The Growth of Literature* (1932-40) and in Nora Chadwick's shorter summary of 'The distribution of oral literature' in the *Old World* (1939). And in the meantime a huge amount of material had been gathered, under various labels, from Africa, the Pacific and parts of Europe (Finland and Ireland above all come to mind, but there was also important work — and analysis — in Eastern Europe), by missionaries, folklorists, administrators and, more recently, by anthropologists. These collections of texts of poems, songs, and narratives of many different kinds had been fired not only by intellectual interests but also by nineteenth- and twentieth-century nationalist movements seeking national identity in oral tradition. So there is a long background to our study. But it was not really until the 1960s and later, however, with the publica-

tion of Milman Parry and Albert Lord's enormously influential analysis of South Slavic epic as oral literature in Lord's *The Singer of Tales*, that the term 'oral literature' really started gaining a wider currency among researchers across a number of academic disciplines.

That concept — or the alternative more abstract 'orality' — had several advantages which could be extended beyond the specific cases to which it had originally been applied.

Perhaps the most important of all, it gave a kind of validity to non-written material which could otherwise seem outside the pale of 'proper' academic disciplines. In doing so it was able to extend our sympathies and understanding of the range of human culture. It turned our attention to voices which before had so often been unheard — the colonised and remote, the underclasses long despised by those steeped in elite high culture, women (so often the composers and performers of laments and other oral forms) — or to the political protest songs or satires of the oppressed or rebellious, from Ireland in the last century to Africa or Bulgaria in this. These *oral* texts were real too, it emerged, and it was not, after all, just in written literature that human verbal art could be subtly expressed and studied.

The term 'oral' also directed attention to certain features of unwritten literary expression that before had been far from obvious to scholars. This was particularly so in its usage by Albert Lord and his students. While there are a number of points on which I would dissent from the conclusions of some of the more extreme proponents of the so-called 'oral theory', it has to be said that rich comparative studies were opened up by Lord's use of the term 'oral' to elucidate the processes of composition and literature. As he pointed out, the heroic singers that he studied produced not fixed and final texts but rather poetic processes of composition by which each performance was liable to be different and unique in itself; there were no single 'correct' texts, as with written literature; and composition took place not beforehand but actually in the act of performance.

Distinguishing these features of oral art — or at any rate of some oral art — not only led to opening up new questions about texts (of which more below) but also provided a foundation for

cross-cultural comparisons through which scholars could connect previously separate and apparently unrelated studies. The development of the consequent comparative movement — extremely influential now across the world — gave scholars from a wide range of different disciplines new insights and a new confidence in studying material which before might have seemed somewhat peripheral to serious academic scholarship. As such it has led to a huge body of well-founded scholarship.¹

But there is more here than just the accumulation of empirical work and the extension of our interests to new and wider fields. For the concept of 'oral' and 'orality' has also challenged scholars to turn to new questions — or, if not totally new, at least to revive interest in certain issues.

One of these was the need to look critically at the concept of 'text'. The idea that the text as *product* was not the only aspect to consider began to gain greater currency for there were also questions to be asked about the *processes* underlying the texts studied by scholars. There were the questions, for example, about transmission and composition, leading to a much fuller awareness that there could be changing processes inherent in what looked at first sight like a finished complete text.

This is a point that comes out particularly clearly from the work of the oral-formulaic scholars. But it also related well to work going on in anthropology or folklore through field observations of the actual delivery of, for example, oral stories. I recall that when in 1960 I first started to study story-telling among the Limba of Sierra Leone in West Africa, I expected that the end result would be the collection and recording of finished texts which I would then transcribe and bring back to England. But actually observing the process of story-telling brought home very clearly that these stories were not fixed artefacts — final and correct texts — which could be collected and dissected once and for all, but rather the changing and creative formulations of individual human tellers, putting forward their own interpretations of various traditional conventions and themes to particular audiences on par-

1. A recent convenient summary is given in Foley 1988 (and bibliography in Foley 1985).

ticular occasions, different each time. These were not (as I had assumed on the basis of my earlier classical training) finalized texts, and they had to be studied as active processes, not frozen products.²

This understanding of the potentially dynamic and changing quality of unwritten texts, poems, and songs of the kind that are so often also defined as 'traditional' or 'folk' has now become much more widely (though not universally) accepted: yet another spin-off from the concept of 'oral'. There is now an impetus to investigate the processes by which these texts were formulated — asking for example about the manner of composition and the interaction between individual creativity and traditional conventions — rather than just taking the texts as final and given.

Questions about performance too have begun to attract more attention. This is a further corollary of the recognition of texts as 'oral' — for in most cases 'oral' means realised in performance.

Let me give another example from my own fieldwork. I was enormously impressed by hearing Limba stories in the field — by their subtlety, imaginativeness, creativity, drama and human qualities, and I recorded a large corpus of them. But when I came back and typed up my transcriptions I could not understand why they seemed so lifeless. All the wisdom and art that I thought I had seen seemed to be gone. Maybe I could evoke a little of this through my memories, but to others they seemed 'simple' traditional tales, to be collected as a fossil, perhaps, but with no truly human or literary interest.

It took me a little time to realise (what I think most fieldworkers would now recognise much more quickly — we *have* progressed!) that this was because the text on the page left out all those performance elements that were integral to this particular art form. The literary effectiveness and insights of Limba stories rested on far more than just the verbal *text* that could be transcribed and then published on a printed page. It was also inextricably dependent on the delivery skills of the story-teller — such as vocal

delivery, facial expressions, gestures, or clever use of mimicry or dramatisation: an effective way, often, of introducing the elements of characterisation or conveying inner feeling that those without first-hand experience of such performances sometimes naively think are lacking in oral tales. There was also the subtle conveying of rapid dramatic narrative, of shocking arrogance, of brooding tragedy or of ironic comment through *how* the words were delivered rather than the words in themselves — all the subtlety and universal commentary, as it were, on the human condition which the texts alone, without the performance, did not manage to convey. As well there were the songs (and occasionally dances) with which the stories were embellished and which provided both an interlude in which the audience could join in and a clever means of structuring and advancing the plot. The whole interplay with the audience formed another essential element. One member of the audience was regularly chosen by the narrator to take the active role of the 'replier' in the telling, by asking rhetorical questions, taking the lead in enacting shock, or horror, or surprise as needed, adding the occasional comment to underline the irony or wonder of the situation, and generally playing the part of the 'common man' as both listener and foil to the main narrator. The whole audience too was expected to participate in the telling by laughing, exclaiming, singing and generally forming part of the whole occasion. These often non-verbal elements of performance were, I came to realise, an essential, not just a marginal part, of Limba stories — and, indeed, *mutatis mutandis* of all oral performances (further details on Limba storytelling and performance in Finnegan 1967).

Perhaps every fieldworker has to discover the performance qualities of oral texts for herself, and of course the details differ with different genres, but this is an aspect that, it is now widely realised, repays investigation in any study of oral forms. This emphasis on the significance of performance — and thus on aspects that are wider than just the narrow verbal text — goes along with a number of consonant moves in wider scholarship. Among these are the widening linguistic interests in *spoken* (and thus performed) rather than just *written* language, perhaps the literary analysts' 'demoting of the text', field studies by anthropologists and others

2. It was in part due to having later read Lord's *Singer of Tales* (1960) that I was able to follow up that field experience (1960-61) in the context of the wider comparative questions that that work raised, but folklorists' analyses of style and performance (e.g. Delargy 1945, Dorson 1960) were also extremely stimulating.

of living oral forms, and certainly the influential work by the American 'performance-orientated' folklorists and anthropologists such as Roger Abrahams, Dennis Tedlock, Richard Bauman or Dell Hymes (among others). The key factor here is the identification of texts as 'oral'; and *hence* of their performed quality.

The upshot is that — as well demonstrated in several of the papers in this Colloquium — there is now an increasing awareness that with oral forms there are questions to be pursued about more than just the verbal text. And, further, that the wider comparative evidence can be drawn on to alert us both to some understanding of the significance of performance in general and to the *kinds* of possible performance elements that it may be worth looking out for in one's own area of interest.

This appreciation of the 'oral' quality of certain forms has also led to new theoretical approaches and questions in the sense of a rethinking of some older problems and a new look at some of our existing texts. Sometimes these approaches were already in the air, but the 'oral movement' or 'oral theory' gave them important extra impetus and confidence.

Much of this has concentrated on the re-analyses of existing texts in terms of their apparent 'oral composition', following the oral-formulaic model of composition demonstrated in the work of Parry and Lord and their followers. Thus a remarkable number of historical texts, from Homer, the Bible and *Beowulf*, to Indian epic, *The Song of Roland* or Scottish and Hispanic ballads, have been reanalysed as the product of oral composition.³ And while such assessments do sometimes have their share of confusion or controversy, nevertheless many scholars — in medieval studies particularly perhaps — have felt that these and similar questionings of some of the old assumptions (for example in Walter Ong's work) have opened up marvellously new windows beyond the older views. They have led to the possibility of exploring the *oral* elements of that culture: a real breath of en-
vigorating fresh air.

3. Indeed such analyses have become almost an industry in their own right (for a summary of, and reference to, some of these, see Foley 1985, 1988).

The interest in orality has also raised new questions about our approach to texts more generally. In particular, what *is* a text? and how should we present texts? At one time, such questions seemed unnecessary, but from the recognition of the *oral* — and hence both dynamic and ephemeral — nature of oral texts there follows the need to think about the processes by which texts become formulated, and by whom: they are not automatically fixed and complete for ever. So questions arise about *which* version should be recorded (or has in the past been recorded) to enter the canon, selected by whom and for what reasons, or what is or might be missing in the versions that we have. It is easy to assume that, for example, the 'myths' we have in our collections, from whatever area of the work they ultimately come, are, as it were, 'the Myths' of such and such a people, handed down exactly in the tradition for generations immemorial and the joint heritage of the people. But scholars are now starting to look more closely at questions such as who wrote these down and why. In the case of non-European and colonised people these were often the overseas antiquarians and missionaries or those educated by them, with consequent implications for the content and context of their recorded versions. This has drawn attention to their contingent rather than necessarily long-established genesis, particularly when we consider the motives of the collectors in shaping the specific form in which they were then published and circulated as authoritative (for examples from South Pacific mythology see Finnegan 1988: chap.6). And though the existing collections of historical texts have not of course all gone through exactly the same process, such examples have suggested some parallel questions that can be worth pursuing.

Quite apart from the different reasons people may have to record oral texts in one form or another, it is often in practice quite hard to decide what really is the 'authentic text', even if one has observed and recorded its actual performance for oneself and is determined to be true to the original. I can illustrate this again from my Limba fieldwork. Let me leave aside the question of *which* of several differing tellings I decided to publish — not that this is ever a question that can be fully solved satisfactorily (and yet, as we can see in the many publications of such

texts, one which in practice has to be solved one way or the other in the end: usually without any further comment or explanation). But there was also the apparently innocuous question: having decided on a particular narration, what exactly *was* the real 'text' of it. I almost never recorded a story without some 'extraneous' noise of interruptions — the crying of a baby, goats bleating, rain hammering down and drowning bits of the tape, someone coming past and greeting — should all that appear? Maybe not — but it was part of the real situation of the oral narration, and surely one element if we want to consider performance and context. . .? And what about the songs — jointly performed by narrator and audience — or the words of the 'replier' that I mentioned earlier, or the audience's laughter or rejoinders? That looked much more central to the story — and yet in most transcriptions all or most of such content does not appear. And what about the many repetitions which in a written text look contrived or boring, but yet were so often basic to the oral effect in actual performance? Once again there is no right answer here. But such questions certainly make one start to query the common Western model of a text as something bounded and final — a kind of enduring abstract model divorced from the contingencies of context or performance — for a more dynamic and relative concept to do with actual realisation through performance(s) in particular context(s). And should we therefore go on to wonder about some of those other historical texts that have come down to us as canonical — are they too less definitive than we have assumed?

There is also the question — even if one decided on which bits of one's recording to take forward — of *how* to present such oral texts. Is the normal linear representation through print on a page sufficient? Some have urged strongly that it is not, arguing for example (as does Dennis Tedlock) that giving no representation of performance features such as speed, volume or rhythm, is in the case of orally performed texts the equivalent of printing musical scores with no indication of time. He and others have developed unconventional ways of conveying this on the printed page (e.g. Tedlock 1980, Seitel 1981) — neither an easy nor cheap

way of publishing, but this format demonstrates well the point they are making. Nowadays there is also the possibility of audio and video recordings which (though not without their own problems) can highlight some of those other elements of performance which, once again, remind us of the desirability of at least *asking* about such elements in oral texts. Having made such records, should we use them for publishing the 'real' text? and what then *is* the text? and does this again raise questions for our assessment of the status (and completeness) of oral texts recorded from the past?

Such questions cannot always be answered, nor should we just try to translate the findings of modern fieldwork directly into the analysis of older texts. Nevertheless the insights from this more recent work on oral texts have served the purpose of opening up new questions which sometimes *can* be investigated. Furthermore they can also lead us, perhaps, to look again at some implicit assumptions of recent Western civilization — or, at least, of certain models that many of us grew up taking for granted — and wonder how far bounded models of texts as inherently verbal and complete are altogether satisfactory when we move from written to oral forms. At the least, understanding the oral and contingent nature of some of these forms can widen — and challenge — certain views about the nature of literature and thought, and their formulation as texts, opening up new ways of looking at both the world around us and the existing corpus of historical texts.

The questions are of course not simple ones, and some (not all) scholarship has now moved on from what at one point was perceived as a rather simple literate/oral, us/them, civilised/primitive dichotomy (a still powerful model, as I discuss later, but fortunately with a diminishing hold). So scholars now pursue questions not just about whether some particular people (or product) was oral *or* literate in some aspect, but rather about the interaction between oral and written modes or sources, or the possibility of *several* different processes (say, of oral and/or written composition) going on concurrently even in the same culture. Many scholars would now also query the older model which sees 'oral' as always old or 'traditional' or rural, moving instead to the view that oral and written modes can interact in almost any

kind of situation, and that oral processes take place not just in the far away and long ago, but also in the cities of modern times. This again has led to new perspectives on both the present and the past, through the realisation that 'orality' is not just something strange that needs to be explained or explained away — whether contemptuously or glamorously — but a concept which, learning from the comparative perspective it engenders, can help us to see not only others but ourselves more clearly.

So much for some of the advantages of the term 'orality'. It has widened our horizons and drawn our attention to forms of human creativity before neglected or unnoticed, given us new questions to ask, encouraged re-analysis of what we thought we already knew, and, over all, through the use of the concept of 'oral' provided a comparative and unifying perspective on what used to be the work of many separated scholars.

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But are there costs to set against the benefits of the term? I believe that there are. So let me take a little space to discuss briefly what I think the dangers can be.⁴

The basic problem, it seems to me, is that having got hold of a useful adjective, we then, in typical academic manner, turn it into a noun and give it more pressure than it can bear. Certainly, all the questions and points I have already mentioned are valuable ones. But I become sceptical when they are turned into generalised and abstract models, and models, furthermore, which are then regarded as automatically applicable to certain categories — in this case to anything which can in any way be called 'oral'.

Take 'oral composition' for example. The particular form discovered by Parry and Lord in their fieldwork in Yugoslavia in the 1930s enlarged our understanding enormously; it is clear that elements of this particular syndrome (composition-in-performance based on oral-formulaic processes) are indeed to be found, in one way or another, very widely throughout the world. But in *all* forms that are to be called 'oral'? That is much more

4. These are elaborated in more detail in some of my other publications, esp. 1988.

problematic — and yet this has been asserted or implied by many (not all) of the 'oral-formulaic' authors.⁵ The basic message is often implied that we have now located *the* oral process, and this is then only too easily assumed to apply automatically wherever or whenever any phenomenon is termed 'oral' in any sense. Similarly other writers have sometimes taken the term 'oral tradition' to be one undifferentiated and clearcut *thing* (as if with the same characteristics everywhere), 'oral society' as a meaningful and comprehensive characterisation of a single type of society, and the many differing modes of thought or thinking throughout the variegated riches of so many human cultures as summed up in the supposedly meaningful 'oral mentality'. These simple-sounding terms are used as if they could really encapsulate in a single concept all the diverse ways (and we know from historical and anthropological research that they are diverse) in which human cultures and individuals outside a certain Western literate elite tradition have formulated and created and transmitted their insights and imagination. It seems a gross over-simplification — either that or a smokescreen, producing high-sounding academic concepts to fill in for our own ignorance.

I must also of course recognise that there is a real problem here, since after all we need general words if we are to use a comparative approach at all, and — a hoary problem for all translators — few words if any are ever cross-culturally satisfactory without introducing some element of misunderstanding. So is 'orality' worse than others? Academics too particularly thrive on abstract terms, the traditional building blocks in their accepted forms of discourse, and a necessary stimulus for intellectual communication and progress. Such terms are all the more important in this case, given the different disciplinary and regional backgrounds of the various scholars engaged in the study of 'orality' in its various forms.

So we *have* to have some general words, even if imperfect for many of our purposes. But this does not absolve us from the duty

5. For some of the arguments about this continuing controversy see e.g. Finnegan 1977 Chap.3, 1988 Chap.5, etc. Some of the leading scholars in the school now admit — even begin to highlight — greater diversity; see e.g. the very good discussion in Foley 1988:109ff.

to choose these carefully and use them critically. What we must avoid is selecting terms which are misleading in drastically oversimplifying a complex reality and/or imbued with hidden, but questionable, assumptions.

It seems to me that both of these have become real dangers with 'orality'.

First, the term unavoidably conveys an impression of uniformity and simplicity. It is a word open to be used, often unthinkingly, to reduce the rich variety of human expressiveness to what is assumed to be a single simple model. It is assumed, what is more, that it means *something* specific and concrete — whereas in fact it has not been solidly established by empirical research that there *is* something specific and concrete to which this general term rightly refers at all.

This is not to say that certain conclusions about specific 'oral' processes in specific times or places have not been established. They certainly have (but perhaps the more convincingly when the adjective 'oral' rather than the abstract noun 'orality' has been in question). But even here it is worth bearing in mind that the term 'oral' itself is not by any means clear. The OED gives two broad meanings: one ('spoken') contrasting with 'written', the other ('using speech only') contrasting with non-verbal communication e.g. through gestures — not the same thing. Even if we focus on the first of these (which most scholars tend to do, though often with some evocations of the second), there are still several *different* respects in which poetry (or any kind of human communication) can be 'oral' — e.g. in composition, in transmission, or in performance — not all of which may necessarily go together; and even that omits the different processes through which each of *these* may be achieved. The term thus raises *questions* (useful ones), rather than giving us all the answers.

Or rather — it *should* raise questions. But only too often it is used as if the term could absolve us from asking what the characteristics of a particular oral form actually are. Just saying that something is 'oral' sometimes seems to release scholars from the need to go on to investigate — as if once the term is used we can just focus on the minor details for we *already* know the broad characteristics of, for example, the processes of com-

position, social function, transmission from the past, outlook of poet and audience. Sometimes such things *are* already known — but this is by virtue of detailed research, not by virtue of the simple clapping on of the term 'oral'.

These dangers in the term 'oral' — the counterpart to its other advantages — are further compounded in the wider term 'orality'. This is a fashionable concept at present, not least owing to the popular and influential works of Ong and Havelock,⁶ so it is worth pondering these a little further. Some of the dangers run on the same lines as already indicated above — the temptation to presume that the term *must* surely correspond to one concrete and single phenomenon otherwise scholars surely wouldn't use it (even if for the moment one can't quite remember or verbalise what that is!), one established by research, and — somehow and somewhere — with a clear and agreed meaning: none of which, I would hold, is actually so. But — and this is the second major danger I want to emphasise — there are yet other bases for misunderstanding in the popular stereotypes which, though applicable also to the other terms, seem to come out most frequently when we start relying on wider terms like 'orality'.

One of the most influential of these associations with the term 'orality' — and a misleading one in my view — is with vast historical stages through which humankind is envisaged as moving in one evolutionary direction. First, goes the story, comes orality, then literacy, then print (as an extension and intensification of literacy), then electric and electronic communication — stages put forward in clear technologically deterministic fashion by McLuhan (e.g. 1967, 1970) and taken up by many writers, notably Walter Ong (1982), since. Each stage is pictured as having its own characteristics, determined crucially by its medium of communication; and as each new medium is introduced, so do society and the individuals within it undergo revolutionary change to enter the next stage. Thus we can look back to European history (and more recently to colonial experience overseas) to see the effects of literacy or of print and, generalising from this, can understand the nature of its opposite — or earlier —

6. For example Ong 1982, Havelock 1982, Havelock and Hershbell 1978.

stage, 'orality'; the assumption behind this being that these effects and interactions were always and everywhere the same irrespective of specific human purposes or social conditions. The whole model, furthermore, is closely tied up with that romantic but at the same time guilt-ridden projection onto others of our own wishes and nostalgias, apparently so typical of recent Western culture. In this the opposite to our own, supposedly, utilitarian, print-dominated, mechanistic, rationalising, industrial form of life is pictured as being found in that lost Eden dwelt in by those others in the past or far away from us. And then all those dreamlike characteristics can be associated with 'orality', since that is assumed to be the typical characteristic of that other state of being.

This is the background, I would argue, to so many of the assumptions about the properties of orality — and, consequently, of oral and non-literate cultures or individuals. The number of these supposed properties — and, correspondingly, of the opposed properties of literacy — is almost infinite. Thus literacy or print is widely assumed to result in (to give just a few examples — some, as will appear, contradictory): rationality; visual rather than auditory modes of thought and perception; linearity; individualism; central government and oppression; freedom and democracy; industrialisation; secularism; the Reformation; objectivity and hence the possibility of detachment and of science and history; urbanism; large-scale trade and economic development; 'modernisation'; and so on and so on — with 'orality' in each case representing the opposite.

Now in many cases, literacy *does* seem to have been associated with some of these characteristics. But the trouble is that in most cases it is almost impossible to establish that it was just *literacy* that was the cause (almost always it was only one factor in an extremely complex situation where, many would also argue, social and political conditions played as large a determining role as literacy *per se*). And in so far as we can try to detect causes and effects at all, there are also so many counter-examples where there were apparently opposite effects that it remains very hard to generalise with any confidence. Of course, it would be pleasant if we *could* generalise in this way — partly to fulfil the dreamlike projection I mentioned earlier, partly to fit with that same old

nineteenth-century stereotype (still so influential on all our thinking) of the Great Divide between Us and Them, the 'watershed' as Talcott Parsons once called it (1966:26) representing 'the fateful development out of primitiveness' through our acquisition of writing — together with all the supposed properties that have so often been assumed to go along with that division and which it is thus so easy to associate, evidence or not, with literacy and orality respectively.

The arguments about the social implications of literacy and of orality continue (see e.g. Goody 1986, 1987, Finnegan 1988) and can obviously not be finally settled here. The point I wish to assert, however, is precisely that the implications of literacy — and hence the supposed characteristics of 'orality' — are *not* settled and agreed. To use the term as if they were, however tempting it is to do so, is to run ahead of the evidence.

The term gets its effects, however, partly because of all these popular stereotypes. And, however careful one is, it is almost impossible to use the concept of 'orality' without evoking these associations in many readers' minds (even if not — insidiously — in one's own too). In my case at least, the attempt to use it (in *Literacy and Orality*, 1988) ended up in a desire to reject the broad term and focus instead on more specific lower-level questions. And a number of scholars would now argue that it is time to give it up (e.g. Barber and Farias 1989:3).

In general terms, then, my view is that the broader term of 'orality' can be dangerously misleading. The various oral elements and processes which have, at various times and places, been established through research simply do not — as the term 'orality' implies — add up to one monolithic and established whole. And to behave as if they did is to deny the many differences in how oral processes take place in practice, in the different respects in which an activity or product can be oral, or in the differing meanings scholars have attached to the term: to deny, it could almost be said, the real diversity and richness of human creativity. The various middle-range patterns and questions or the new theoretical challenges that — as I discussed earlier — have arisen from the concept of 'oral' open doors to our understanding. But trying to use and establish the concept 'orality' does the opposite.

So, after that quick run-through some of the insights and problems that have come from using the term (or versions of it) — what is 'orality'?

On the basis of what I have just been arguing, it may come as no surprise that I added an apparent afterthought to my title: 'What is orality — *if anything?*'. For my overall conclusion is that in one sense 'orality' is *not* anything; or at any rate not anything in the apparently unitary sense that the term seems to imply. It is currently a fashionable term, and one which, as I have tried to indicate, carries with it a whole series of often-hidden assumptions (even if not always in the scholarly writings themselves, then often by the readers of these publications). It is important not to be taken for a ride and conclude that *because* the term is around and used there is necessarily something in the real world — known and agreed by scholars — to which it applies. This is not so. Furthermore there is something in the term which appeals to the romantic and mystical in us, that call from the far-away but treasured 'other', the nostalgic 'world we have lost' — a powerful and in its way valuable appeal, but nonetheless a poor basis for establishing rigorous empirical conclusions. Certainly there are detailed questions — and to some extent conclusions — which, as I have discussed, we can come up with about unwritten products and processes which can relate to scholarly empirical work and lead to illuminating conclusions or reassessments of existing material and approaches. But for the most part these are more often the result of wielding the adjective (not the abstract noun) as a stimulus for investigating particular products, situations or processes in a more specific way.

The term 'oral' can, then, indeed direct us to many interesting questions, but even then — let alone drawing in the connotations of the more generalised abstract term — the concept and its application need to be defined and researched, rather than just assumed as already known. Using the more generalised 'orality' compounds the problems. It gives the impression that it refers to something concrete and unambiguous, empirically established, when this is quite simply not the case; it links with a whole

set of implicit and confusing connotations which, if made explicit, many scholars would not in fact accept; and it suggests the existence of some clear-cut and single set of characteristics where, even when some may have been established in some cases, there is no solid agreement as to which features are central or whether they always necessarily go together.

What is 'orality' then? My first answer is, therefore, and in the sense I have just explained — '*Nothing*'.

But that is not quite the end of the matter. The term also has certain functions — one aspect of meaning in actual usage — and ones not altogether to be sniffed at.

First, I would say part of its significance is that it is an extremely convenient *slogan*. It forms a useful label and motivation for getting scholars together to share their ideas (this Colloquium on orality and modern Greek poetry among others is one good example) and in communicating in joint comparative work. It is a signal to ourselves and others that we are in some sense engaged in a common endeavour. And it provides a handy abstract term to publicise certain academic interests and schools of thought (that last is indeed rather an important function given the way abstract terms are so often taken to be a prerequisite for proper academic respectability).

That may sound a provocative assertion, and indeed is intended as such. The term has certainly often enough been used in this way, and as an observer of, as well as participant in, the academic scene I offer this conclusion with some touch of cynicism. But it is not a wholly negative point. It is important and necessary for both individual scholars and collective institutions to have slogans to label, encourage and formulate their intellectual pursuits. In this respect 'orality' (together with the various adjectival uses of the term 'oral') has performed a far from trivial function and, as I discussed earlier, has led to far-reaching and, I hope, now irreversible new insights and approaches in the appreciation of human cultures.

Second, this label of 'orality' plays an important role in reminding us of a range of questions that not all scholars in the past have directed their attention to. It has led to new approaches and controversies, together with a growing body of literature where

such questions are discussed. Even if — as I would argue — the answers to such questions are not always as fully agreed as some suppose, a knowledge of this literature can both stimulate and inform more detailed work on specifics: there is no need for each of us in turn to independently invent the wheel. Above all, the work publicised under the heading of 'oral' or of 'orality' can draw our own detailed specialist work — whether on medieval and modern Greek poetry, Homer, modern Pentecostal sermons or Limba story-telling — into a comparative framework where, even if we cannot always reach definitive worldwide generalisations, we can at least see our own particular academic preoccupations in a wider perspective.

To summarise my final conclusion then. 'Orality', I would argue, isn't anything. In my view, that is (and contrary to the assumptions of some other scholars), there is nothing clear, definite or agreed to which that abstract noun can refer. *But* the term nevertheless can perform a useful function, provided we go about it with care, in directing us to certain kinds of investigations and insights, labelling and identifying certain aspects of human behaviour, forming a link between scholars interested in a range (even if not a fully agreed one) of partly-shared questions and insights. Insofar as it directs us to anything specific and concrete these are perhaps a series of differing and only sometimes overlapping activities and characteristics, best described by differing senses and applications of the adjective 'oral' rather than building up to one unified and monolithic state describable by the noun 'orality'. Perhaps even better, in the end, would be to treat the term as a kind of verb — an injunction rightly exhorting us to pursue particular questions or a useful slogan to encourage and reinforce certain common interests — rather than a noun which could refer clearly or unambiguously to anything concrete or enduring in the real world.

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