Six Proposals for an "Ethnography of the Performed Word": Afterthoughts on Reading Martin Gaenszle's Review Article on the Study of Oral Ritual Texts
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The recent studies reviewed by Gaenszle (1992, in this volume) remind us of how little we know of the rich tradition of oral ritual texts (and oral tradition in general) in the Central Himalayas. In addition, our general approach is deficient in that we tend to neglect the originality such texts "live by", and treat what is spoken and performed as if it were something that had been written to be read. That the "science of the spoken word" as called for by Dennis Tedlock (1983) is still in its infancy, and that even "linguists begin their work by disposing of the voice, committing to writing only those aspects of oral performance that are most comfortably noted by alphabetic writing" (Tedlock 1980: 828), has evidently much to do with our own Western tradition: with the distinctions we make between "content" and "form", "message" and "aesthetics", "libretto" and "musical delivery", "script" and "performance", "word" and "sound", "doctrine" and "poetics"...

In response to Gaenszle, who concludes his stimulating paper by asking how we anthropologists should collect and present ritual texts, the following proposals (1) may be made:

1. The hypertrophy that the "text" as a notion has undergone in poststructuralist theory (for which the kind of texts we deal with are just "antiquarian set pieces", "quotes" from a native past (2) or from an endless murmuring of "es spricht") should not prevent us from valuing ritual recitations as texts in their own right, as works of orature. What we need at first is the documentation of complete texts, rather than fragments of texts inserted in our own meta-text as particularly striking pieces of evidence.

2. Unless impossible for technical reasons, texts should be recorded in situ, i.e., in the in-performance situation. As experience shows, their reproduction in vitro is likely to confuse or even embarrass the informant asked to dictate, phrase by phrase and "in prose", a text which he has memorized, and is used to perform, in a chanted form only. Indoor, studio-recording of a chanted version by the ethnographer might be objected on grounds that it would be inauspicious to recite such and such a text outside the ritual framework and/or without a tradition-sanctioned occasion. In any case, artificial reproduction - whether dictated or chanted - necessarily results in an artificial product because it is only through the manifold and often subtle interaction between the reciter and his audience that an oral text becomes what it is sui generis: something performed, staged, represented, acted out and thus also interpreted, of course. This interaction may be said to be intrinsic not least because it has a bearing on both morphology and meaning. (3) The dynamics of phraseology and diction in the "composition-in-performance"; the indexical links between words and gestures (ritual acts); the persuasive reinforcement or even reinterpretation words may receive by their actual articulation (prosody, musical modulation or
accompanyment); the performer's para-

matic and other) utterances which are

sound acts and speech acts at the

same time, and (b) of the individual

performer's prosodic presentation.

The latter includes the stresses and stops,

the pitches and falls in the dynamics of

vocal articulation, interjections, whis-
tles, groans - and a number of other

chiefly paralinguistic or metalinguistic

means that illustratively "onomatopo-

eo", solemnize or ridicule, highlight or

sly down, explain what would other-

wise remain open to interpretation, and

comment on the text's or the perfor-

mer's own terms of communication.

Evidently, a faithful documentation

tion of a text-performance in its multi-

mediality may also provide important

empirical clues to the "perlocutionary

return" of a text, especially of those
texts the recitation of which is designed
to have an immediate effect upon reality,
such as a psycho-somatic effect in a

healing ritual. One may note in passing

that this "perlocutionary return" is one

of the least explored and most specula-
tively analyzed issues in anthropo-

logical textual pragmatics. We seem to

know much more about how a text is

structured and intends to effect than
about how these structures are likely to

structure or re-structure the listener's

perception of his self.

4. Anthropologists tend to concen-

trate on the "official" aspects of ritual

and symbolism, and rely mostly on what

ritual specialists and other informants

recruited from the elite expound as part

of "shared belief" or at least "authorita-
tive interpretation". Yet the claim to

treat a ritual text as an event, rather than

as an isolated monument, implies that

the ethnographer should also keep a

close eye on the unstaged, that is, on

what happens (or seems to happen)

incidentally, "inofficially" or peripher-

ally within or around the arena of a

given ritual. (6) (a) Among the nonce-
events that merit to be noticed are no
doubt the blunders committed by the

performer(s). They are to be noted in

our publications, along with the emend-
ments the informants contribute later.

Mispredictions; omissions and

faulty substitutions; word monsters

resulting from unusual republication or

elision, narrative sequences that appear

confused, redundant or mutilated; and

any other kind of arbitrary permutation

must be taken seriously - all the more as

they might not always be unanimously

recognized by our informants as plain

"mistakes". First, one never knows at

once whether such "mistakes" were

intended - say, as a kind of ludic fabri-

cation - by the reciter, or resulted from his

"noding", or yet again from his actual

failure to conform to conditions as set by

meter, rhythm or melody. Second, inten-

ted or not, they may fulfill the

function of a rhetorical device (such as

times, apopisis, aposdoketon, hapology, etc.)

that works "by surprise" and is likely to create a

new focus, dismantle an imagery, amplify or
dissect an idea. For the audience, certain

"mistakes" pose the question whether or
to what extent "religious truth" and

"poetic exubercance" can coexist, and

question the "validity" not only of an

individual performance, but also -
temporarily at least - of the performer's

religious tradition as a whole. Third,

whether discomforting for the audience or

not, such "mistakes" may be revela-
tory not only as "Freudian slips", but also as

"generic overrides" (7) that lay bare a

part of the "generic program" under-

lying the text as a whole; this is the case

when blunders turn out to represent

anomalies from the conceptual or para-
digmatic viewpoint only, while struc-
turally they conform to the organizing

principles of the general formulaic

setup or the genre-specific imagery.

(b) Furthermore, it is expedient to pay

full attention to what happens outside

the liturgy and arena of the ritual

proper: the conversations (in the breaks

or after the ritual) that openly or obliquely
evaluate a performance in interpreting an
oracle or commenting on the artistic
achievement of the individual performer, etc.,

as well as the spontaneous events (merit,
disputes, outbreak of violence) among

both the participants and non-partic-

pants. Certain events, especially when

they tend to recur regularly, may throw

some light not only on the laity's
general attitude towards texts and

rituals, but also on the interactive

processes that are at work in what one

may call the self-produced psychol-

ogistics of a given ritual. The complex

Western Tamang death-feasts (charac-
terized, among other things, by the fact

that the laymen do not understand

what the lamas recite in Tibetan) might

provide an example of how important

affect impacts from the periphery

may be in the "mourning process". The

spontaneous nightly gatherings of

young people of either sex indulging in

"trivial" songs and all sorts of fun in

the vicinity of (neither too close to, nor
too far from) the open-air site of the

mourners. The open-air site of the

mortuary ceremonies are much

frowned at by the elders and notables as

a practice that morally perverts the

youth and debases the ritual. On the

other hand, there is ample evidence to

conclude that such peripheral events,

however dysteleological they may

appear, do exert a positively "paliative"
or even "cathartic" influence on the

mourners' feelings at the centre. (8)
5. Only a consistent spelling can warrant the accessibility of one's material to others. Broad transcriptions neglecting important linguistic features impede the comparative work yet to be done and should therefore be avoided. If the text is in a language which is written, such as Nepali, etc., it should be given in correct transliteration. (9) For texts in a non-written language, the transcription should be a phonological or basically phonological one. - The transcript of the text should respect the essential properties of its original oral delivery. Although an arrangement in stanzas or cola is certainly more comfortable for the eye and in many cases even justifiable by syntax or meter, it can ignore the autonomy with which the prosody actually intervenes, disjoints a syntactic unit (enjambement) or "compresses" several such units into one, etc. Above all, such regularized typographical patterns are likely to make one forget that oral delivery consists of an alternation of utterances and silences (hiatus, pause), in which the latter might be as important as the former. Needless to add, our publications should also include samples of the musical delivery in the conventional notation.

6. The presentation of our material in publication often proves problematic because we translate from little-known, unwritten languages and interpret texts that are not in plain prose and abound in archaisms and/or metaplasms and other patterns alien to the colloquial language. No rules can of course be given for how one should translate a text, but it is perhaps worth reflecting on what a translation should render. The present writer has always preferred a rather technical translation that tries to render both phraseology and diction of Western Tamang ritual texts and to respect their specific structural or poetic qualities which are in a sense part of the meaning, namely means of evoking associations, providing cross-references between contexts and imposing formal "solutions" on what is conceptually irresolvable, etc. This procedure necessitates some compromise with the stylistic taste of the target language, but has, on the other hand, the advantage of facilitating the orientation for the reader who is not familiar with the source language. Different texts may require different approaches with regard to formulation and style, but the translation should principally render what the text means, here and now, to the informants themselves, while the etymological meaning and the ethnographer's own exegesis are to be dealt with in the comments only. As far as practically possible, (10) one should not confound these three levels of interpretation arbitrarily and, say, fill a gap in the informants' interpretation by a meaning won by way of etymology in the translation itself.

To conclude, these proposals are not meant to suggest that the etnomusicologis be also linguist, philologist, folklorist, literary theorist, musicologist, psychologist and cameraman in one, but that he should learn from these specialists and even collaborate with them, occasionally at least. In any case, he is advised to give more consideration to the ritual texts being multi-medial events that take place in the interactional triangle between performer, direct beneficiary and general audience. Only if we know more about the very 'functioning' of the texts performed, will we be able to know more about their raison d'être: about what oral tradition is. More than twenty years after the inception of the "ethnography of speaking", it is now perhaps time to develop an "ethnography of reciting".

We must not be blinded by the mythologem of the "lost writing/lost book" so widespread among the peoples whose texts we record, and take it as an acknowledgement of a basic communicative "insufficiency" inherent in all that is oral. (11) Rather, we have to explore what these traditions themselves cite in support of their orality. We should listen to the Western Tamang shaman who, according to his texts, wants to heal by "music and dance" also, and try to understand why an important god in Maharashtra categorically refuses to be "fettered" by writing in a book and prefers, instead, to be celebrated in nighting songs by illiterate herdsmen (Sontheimer 1976: 198).

Notes:

(1) For reason of space I refrain from discussing the theoretical issues implied in the proposals.
(3) As Maskarinec (1990: 220) remarks with reference to the "rulings" of the jñākri "(...) I have come to realize that a thorough explanation of context is even more critical than are extensive glosses if these texts are to be understood and interpreted (...)".
(4) Antonin Artaud called "spatial language" those specific articulatory and gestural means in theatre, through which the verbal becomes concretized, the signified (otherwise likely to be supplanted by the purely verbal medium) gains in autonomy and is more readily grasped (Todorov 1971: 213ff.).
(5) Holmberg (1989: 142ff.) is right in calling "shamanic soundings" the Tamang jñākri's rituals. - Maskarinec (1990: 160) brief description of how the jñākri articulates a mantra is a rather rare example in the literature under consideration here.

(6) One of the more or less reliable test methods to distinguish the unstaged from the staged is to follow the old-established rule requiring from the ethnographer that he identify all persons present (whether active or passive participant, performer or helper, beneficiary [patient, client, sponsor,kinsman or onlooker, etc.]) at the site of a ritual in order to determine their role and their relationship to each other.

(7) I adopt the term from Foley (1990: 373-374, 377, 386-387). He sees the "generic override" at work in a faulty choice between alternatives that are equivalent in terms of story pattern, but not in terms of actual narrative content; such errors are the result of story-pattern congruence and the Serbo-Croatian bard's traditional impulse towards analogy.

(8) And since such spontaneous gatherings occur regularly, one is even led to ask if they are not to be considered an integral, albeit "profane", part of the death-feast.

(9) Perhaps with the exception of Tibetan dialects, the spelling of terms not attested in the dictionaries, in the literary or urban colloquial language can in most instances be easily established either on the basis of etymology or with the help of literate informants.

(10) This distinction cannot be applied radically, of course, since the exegesis by the informants is already an exegesis for the ethnographer, and the very work of translating (the choice of adequate terms, style, punctuation, layout, etc.) is already an interpretation by the ethnographer.
references:


This brief survey of the resources of the libraries of Paris on Himalayan studies was carried out in 1991-1992 by several specialist librarians whose names are given at the end of each section of this report. Although one of them, Lucette Bouloins, acted as liaison -- interviewing other librarians, collecting their papers and translating some of them into English -- it is a collaborative work.

As to the collections described herein, the reader is invited to take into account the following circumstances: in spite of the fidelity and spirit of heritage preservation which are characteristic of librarians, collections are, like mountains, subject to the erosion of Time. Without mentioning fires and wars (which did not affect too much Paris libraries) and -- still more destructive -- moving from one building to another, one may observe, here and there, a surreptitious ‘evasion’ of some books, as centuries pass. May the God of Reading forgive those scholars who (out of mere absent-mindedness, of course) forgot to bring back a borrowed book. And worse cases occurred -- let them sleep. This inquiry could not include the checking one by one of all the volumes on the shelves and files, and, especially, as some collections are very old, some books may be missing.

Several libraries in the oriental field have moved, some suffer from lack of room or lack of staff; librarians had to adapt themselves to computerization, which took a lot of time before allowing (or so we were told) to gain time actually. This may explain some of the difficulties for readers. But as a whole, the present inquiry gives, it is hoped, a rather clear view of the present available resources. Such an inquiry should be repeated every twenty or thirty years to take changes into account.

It would be fair to pay homage to all the librarians, past and present, whose patient work, century after century, permits now every interested citizen of any country the privilege of reading, free of charge in our public libraries, this impressively rich heritage of knowledge, be it a 1743 Newari manuscript, a Tibetan gold manuscript, or the 1981 population census of Nepal: this right to read, this free access to knowledge, for which we had to fight in the past, is one of the fundamental rights in a civilized country, and one of the pillars of freedom.

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