

Editor's Column

Habitual readers of *Oral Tradition* know that an informed predilection for open disciplinary borders is a hallmark of the journal. New readers may confirm the value of that statement by addressing themselves to the splendid work assembled in *Oral Tradition* 15/2: the authors cover conceptual ground that is as nuanced and compelling as is sweeping the cultural and historical territory they explore. Because our warrant is the promotion of the study of oral tradition in all of its facets, we welcome your ideas and your submissions, and strongly encourage you to add your voice to this lively discussion.

Mark Amodio leads with the fifteenth annual Albert Bates Lord & Milman Parry Lecture. His theme, Anglo-Saxon oral poetics in the post-Norman conquest milieu, focalizes the flexibility and resilience of oral poetics and performance practices; impermeable walls insulating orality from literacy are notable for their absence. A masterful study of the Middle English simplex *abelzen*, “to anger or incense; to grow angry,” deftly illustrates the crucial role innovation and economy play in oral poetics.

Lauri Harvilahti offers a fascinating illustration of Amodio’s “realm of oral poetics.” An account of early fieldwork on Altai oral epic and notes on forty years of schooling in the *Kai* (laryngeal style) tradition prepare the way for an interview with several representatives of the Kalkin family, a dynasty of traditional *Kai* epic singers. Excerpts from the *Maadai-Kara* epic—a cosmogonic myth of “the heavenly tree” derived from shamanistic initiation rites—as performed by father and son with idiolectal variants depict a metonymic network of form and meaning that imbues a single formula with polysemy and maintains a universe.

Contributors Stephan Meyer, Anna-Leena Siikala, and Sybil Thornton reflect on oral/literate reciprocity and how it plays out in a given *oikoumene*. Meyer’s probe of a collaborative South African auto/biography brings to the fore the ancient, fundamental problem of translation—of human experience between individuals, and of human expressions between modes of performance, spoken and written. Siikala’s fine essay on Kalevala rune-singing shows to advantage the protean nature and functionality of oral tradition. Her reading of the conjugation of somatic attitude, performance arena, cultural agency, gender, and personal ambivalence adumbrates and indexes the full range of purposes and ends available to a tradition—from the quotidian to the supernatural and back again by way of the risqué. A cautionary tale of purported scholarly truth dashed on the rocks of *a priori* expectation implies much more than the frustrations the field campaigners express. Thornton’s exhaustive study of a sixteenth-century Japanese epic

narrative begins with the assertion that a millenium of mutual influences precludes separate, clearly differentiated oral and literary traditions in Japan: oral poetic diction is no guarantee of oral provenance. With Siikala, Thornton's case study of the *Kōnodai senki* ("Chronicle of the Battle of Kōnodai") elaborates a clear panoramic vision of the general and specific functions of epic, in this case Japanese epic—a peculiar rhetorical structure reliant on mythmaking and texts, an invocation of traditional narratives to legitimate new ideologies, a continuum of performance modes and skilled performers, subordination to a master narrative, and possessing a striking range of cultural functions. Her reading of a collation of sermon materials, popular narratives, other performing arts and poetry intended to console the vanquished and bereaved, to pacify the angry spirits of the dead, and to justify a new temporal order enlists the heuristic of "traditional referentiality." With it she reaches an understanding of how the many complex elements of *Kōnodai senki* work as a unified narrative.

Drawing from Millman Parry's classic definition of the formula, from discourse analyses of the performances of auctioneers, horserace callers, hockey face-offs, and cricket phraseology, Koenraad Kuiper essays Chomskian concepts of internalized, external, and performance constraints, together with rules of discourse structure in his analysis of how a formula is like and is not like other verbal forms. He finds that the idiomatic phrase is by nature most akin to the formula, since both share felicitousness, and that the formula is not only a way of speaking but also of seeing, of negotiating the network of semantic relationships that constitute knowledge of a given subject.

Diverse as the essays assembled here in fact are, they nonetheless share a signal universal: each reveals a human being imbricated in a fragile and unique here and now, in dialogue with a network of living tradition that insistently voices the profound dignity of human experience. Such a thread, it seems to me, is sewn into the conceptual binding of these half-dozen studies in *Oral Tradition*.

John Zemke, Assistant Editor

Center for Studies in Oral Tradition
21 Parker Hall
University of Missouri
Columbia, MO 65211 USA
Telephone: 573-882-9720
Fax: 573-446-2585
e-mail: oraltradition@missouri.edu