

Oral Tradition in the Context of Verbal Art

Thomas Hale

The oral tradition is a field defined by what it is not—it is oral, not written. But the barrier between the two remains rather fluid and artificial. Certainly, there are contexts in which writing is excluded for historical or cultural reasons. But the examples of written influence on oral traditions and vice versa have led me to emphasize the larger picture of verbal art rather than focus entirely on the oral tradition.

For example, for a project on women's songs from the Sahel and Savanna region of West Africa, my co-principal investigator, Aissata Sidikou-Morton, and I, along with a team of 15 other researchers, are assembling a corpus of several hundred songs. The goal is to find out what women in these Islamic and patriarchal societies are saying in this medium.

Most of the songs are of oral origin. But there are traditions in Hassaniya Arabic from Mauretania and in Hausa from northern Nigeria where the barrier between written and oral is fuzzy. Sometimes a song starts out in oral form, is then written down, and is then reborn again later as a song, or vice versa. Songhay epics from Mali, Niger, and Benin were narrated originally in oral form, but we don't know to what extent the written chronicles from Timbuktu describing the same events helped to preserve the oral narrative tradition heard today. The long narrative by the fourteenth-century North African traveler Ibn Battuta started life as dictation to a scribe.

For me the itinerary of the text, written or oral, is more interesting than the form. Perhaps that is why I've been studying Middle Egyptian hieroglyphics for the last two years. The goal is to learn not only about the earliest African literature but also about the early songs sung by women in Africa.

New directions for the field depend on one's position. As someone coming from African literature, the most important products of the oral tradition have been the long narratives that we call epic. But we are learning that a shorter form such as the song constitutes a very powerful and often direct medium. It can serve as an outlet for people who do not otherwise

have a public voice. Song, of course, is a genre that is not new for people interested in the oral tradition, but it is novel for most of my more text-oriented colleagues in African literature.

The other new dimension is technical. We now are able to bring the page alive with visual and audio material. Two versions of *The Epic of Sundiata*—the film *Keita: L'Héritage du Griot*, which frames scenes from the story in a modern context, and the video or DVD dramatization of the same narrative in production by colleagues at Tufts University—will both help students to understand more clearly the vibrant nature of the oral tradition. The next step is to field record full versions of some of these epics and make them available with subtitles.

Pennsylvania State University