

Orality in Tibet

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Orality is a significant, multivalent element of Tibetan religious and cultural life. It is profoundly intertwined with the transmission of written texts, the performance of rituals, and esoteric learning.

Here I mention only three general categories from the very rich complex of oral practices. These pertain (1) to the teaching of texts, (2) to the pedagogical techniques of debate, and finally (3) to more esoteric understandings of what speech communicates in addition to literal meaning. Textual study is always accompanied by at least one, and often all three, of these oral processes, and by others as well.

1. Texts are not regarded self-explanatory units of information that can be digested outside the community of scholarly or ritual practices. The teacher's commentary is therefore a crucial element of textual reading. Oral scholarly traditions interpret, organize, compare, critique, expand upon, and make practical suggestions regarding the material in the text. Sometimes these oral discourses are themselves written down and become texts for further oral comment in a subsequent generation.

2. Tibetan pedagogy, as Georges Dreyfus has amply illustrated in his new book,¹ relies on a dialectic of commentary and debate. Debate itself involves a great deal of memorization and oral incantation of texts; debate is an interactive process in which students must defend philosophical positions in the in-your-face give and take of heated debates. These debates are the chief training ground for scholars in many Tibetan traditions; they are also a major spectator sport. Rhetorical strategies involve textual citation, the thrusting of unwanted consequences on the defender, and feinting through chess-like moves that suggest one line of thought when actually headed toward another.

¹ Despite the widely recognized significance of oral traditions in Tibet, relatively little has been written about them. However, a recent and very compelling analysis of oral debate, including its significance as a pedagogical tool and its juxtapositional logic, rhetoric, and dialects is the partly autobiographical account of Georges B. J. Dreyfus (2003), the first Westerner to become a Tibetan Geshe.

In all these ways, oral traditions are crucially involved in the training and performance of scholars. In some contexts however, spoken words transmit something other than erudite learning itself. We can consider two main examples of this phenomenon.

3. Certain sacred Sanskrit syllables, transcribed into Tibetan, are carriers of qualities important to scholars as well as practitioners. Debates, for example, typically begin with the incantation of the syllable *dhi*, considered the essential sound of Manjuśrī, personification of wisdom. In this way, the debater invokes the presence of divine wisdom before beginning to test the mettle of his own. Likewise, his study of the texts whose tenets he will probe dialectically would have been preceded by his receiving scriptural transmission, or *lung* on that text. *Lung* simply entails hearing the work read aloud by someone who has himself received *lung* on it. Such transmission is understood to facilitate connection to that text. Only afterward would the intellectual engagement begin.

Further, in the course of being consecrated into any tantric practice, one receives a consecrated *lung* of the *mantra*, literally “mind-protector,” which is understood to hold the central power of the practice itself. This must be received orally. Thus, the gate to textual learning opens through orality, texts are studied through oral performance, and the most esoteric of the practices they teach are essentialized in spoken sound.

In all these ways we might say that book learning, however elaborate, never becomes in Tibet a place apart from the living, spoken, and enchanting speech of those most closely allied with teaching and transmitting its texts.²

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References

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² For an introduction to epics and poetry, see Jackson 1996 and Samuel 1996. To my knowledge my work (Klein 1994) remains the most extensive overview of categories of orality in Tibet. Patrul 1994, full of teaching stories, lists, and advice for practitioners, is a famous example of a text that began as oral commentary.

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