

## Japanese Oral Tradition

Sybil A. Thornton

In Japan, the term “oral traditions” covers not only those songs, proverbs, and folktales usually considered the domain of anthropology and folklore studies, but also orally delivered or performed narratives, or *katarimono*, among them epics (*gunki monogatari*). Epics, especially the *Heike monogatari* (*Tale of the Taira House*; fourteenth c.), are still performed: epics are still read out loud or chanted to an audience using a manuscript or printed text as a libretto (as *kôdan*); there are at least three different existing traditions of the blind and sighted chanting *Heike* to the accompaniment of a lute (*heikyoku*). With these three existing traditions and over one hundred textual variants of the *Heike* alone, scholarly discussion is informed by a series of dyads—capital/provincial, guild/non-guild, elite/non-elite, reading/performance, learned/popular, text/variant, text/music, literature/religion, and blind/sighted. Studies in the “oral” focus either on historical research into medieval guild and non-guild performers, or on fieldwork with contemporary performers in different *heikyoku* traditions.

Under these conditions, there is very little left of a pure “oral tradition” to speak of, where narratives are composed, transmitted, and preserved only in performance. However, oral tradition does survive in manuscripts (or block-printed texts) in terms of “traditional narrative,” where narrative strategies are based on oral composition and formulaic diction. Although the orality of Japanese epics is now a given, it is difficult to calculate just how much of an effect the Parry-Lord oral-formulaic theory has had on Japanese scholarship, which has tended to concentrate on establishing manuscript genealogies or mining the texts for evidence of the religious practices and practitioners that might indicate who contributed to the texts or who used them. On the other hand, the effect of the oral-formulaic theory on western English-language scholarship is clear enough. In *heikyoku* studies, musicologists have noted the similarities of types of variation in text performance and variation in manuscript texts, the similarity of the variation of musical patterns and variations in diction, and the social contexts of the development of highly individualized traditions of

performance. In studies of the *Heike* and other epics, historians and literature specialists have identified themes and type-scenes in texts, noted the importance of such type-scenes and themes over diction (or even chirographic codes) in categorizing texts as oral-derived or not, and challenged the idea of the strict oral-written dichotomy. What is particularly interesting is the way that textual, historical, and musical studies have been brought together, because of the focus on the *Heike monogatari*, which should lead to a clearer understanding of the development of this narrative cycle and of other epic cycles as well. What I would like to see is closer work with scholars working in European languages.

*Arizona State University*

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