

# **Performance Literature and the Written World: Lost in Transcription?**

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This number contains the second group of articles on Performance Literature that form volume 20 of *Oral Tradition*, and that began life as papers for the workshops on Literature and Performance in the School of African and Asian Studies (SOAS), London University, part of the larger AHRB (Arts and Humanities Research Board) Centre for African and Asian Literature.

As outlined in the Special Editor's Column in volume 20, no.1, the workshops explored the phenomenon of literature in performance and performance literature defined as literature written, created, or composed to be experienced in performance. It involved a large group of specialists in literatures and cultures from African and Asian societies as well as European.<sup>1</sup> Papers, discussants, questions, and successive workshops generated further research questions, and the selection of articles here, as in the previous number, is informed by those discussions, as well as reflecting the same spirit of interdisciplinary research.

The core questions surround the relation of the various types of written text to the performance, or the performance to the various attempts to record or memorialize that performance, and the social or cultural context of that relationship. One of the most striking features that emerges in this collection of studies is the richness and variety of links and relations between a "text" and the performance, the different levels and types of textuality and of their relations to any performance. Studies examine how oral performance might generate written texts of several different registers (see especially Idema, Shirane, and Gerstle in this number), and the written texts themselves have a variety of roles in relation to the live performance (part memorial, "complete" articulation, deliberately partial rendition, edited and partial release, and more). These differences are not so much a function

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<sup>1</sup> See the Centre website for full details: [www.soas.ac.uk/literatures/Projects/Projectsindex.html](http://www.soas.ac.uk/literatures/Projects/Projectsindex.html) and [www.soas.ac.uk/literatures/Projects/Performance/Performance.html](http://www.soas.ac.uk/literatures/Projects/Performance/Performance.html).

of the general characteristics of oral performance or of the written word that might be read across cultures, as of the far wider social or professional standing of the performers (see, e.g., du Perron and Magriel in no.1, Gerstle in this issue), or the artistic and cultural preoccupations and workings of the society in question. As Karen Barber puts it (below), often texts depend on performance, and performance on text, and both are cultural artifacts.

Ruth Finnegan's paper begins by discussing the multisensory techniques and effects of performance, the kaleidoscope of impressions generated by any one performance, emphasizing the elements that cannot simply be preserved on the written page, and she suggests that crosscultural comparison undermines any two-fold division between any of the categories invoked. James Burns offers an excellent case study of performance in its cultural context, that of funeral drum music and its current development poised between tradition and modernity. C. Andrew Gerstle's paper on kabuki and the production of texts stresses the deliberate limitation on full written texts, but the proliferation of vivid visual and part written, part artistic "mementos" that were just as important in contemporary Japanese culture as a "bare" written text and indeed became a genre by themselves. So too, the complex and various types of textuality, and of textual relation to the performance, are examined in Japanese poetry by Haruo Shirane. The implications are striking for any scholars working on texts in other cultures where there are both long literary (and highly literate) traditions and a complex performance culture. Similarly, Wilt L. Idema examines the extraordinary variety of texts with different functions and the gradual creation of the "literary text" for medieval Chinese plays. The various textual representations of Chinese drama are also analyzed by Andrew Lo.

With the article by John Miles Foley, we return to the anthropological question of how a modern scholarly edition should or can represent the performance of poetry that was orally composed and recorded in performance (cf. also Schieffelin in no.1). A keen debate has surrounded the composition of oral epic poetry, propelled by the research on the South Slavic poetry by Milman Parry and Albert Lord, and the acoustic recordings deposited in the Parry Collection at Harvard University. For these poems that have been the basis for so much argument, the radical methods of publication here envisaged include audio-publication to replicate the original sound, and they should transform our understanding of these performances—and therefore the theoretical possibilities of orally composed epic.<sup>2</sup> For other poetic traditions in which the poetry and performance are not on an epic scale, significantly different questions about memory, memorization, and fixity arise, and the articles by Karin Barber and Martin

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<sup>2</sup> See the electronic edition of *The Wedding of Mustajbey's Son Bećirbey* at [www.oraltradition.org/zbm](http://www.oraltradition.org/zbm).

Orwin here both attempt to blur the conventional distinction between fixed written text and (unfixed) oral poem. They examine the possible conception of fixed “texts” that are entirely oral (that is, never written down) or performances within oral traditions that include elements that are “quotations,” quotable and virtually fixed expressions that therefore seem to need an equivalent conception of “entextualization.” Orwin finds in the Somali case an indigenous conception of definitive text that is not based upon the written word.

What emerges strikingly from these studies is how much more common the performance of literature is than the scholarly concentration on written texts usually implies, and the questions each separate study suggests for performance literatures in other societies are immensely productive. Relations between text and performance, performance and text, almost infinitely varied, are susceptible to intricately complex cultural or artistic factors. For those of us who study the written texts of past societies, the theoretical implications are sobering.

One of the most illuminating features of the SOAS Workshops was that they included recordings, tapes, videos of performances, fragments of live performance, as well as rich illustrations of performance made for Chinese, Japanese, and other audiences. It is therefore particularly appropriate and pleasing that the journal *Oral Tradition* has made it possible to replicate some of these with eCompanions (see [www.oraltradition.org](http://www.oraltradition.org)), and we thank the Center for Studies in Oral Tradition at the University of Missouri very warmly for making this possible.

Above all, I would like to use this opportunity to thank Stephanie Jones, Administrative Assistant to the SOAS Centre, for her tireless work on both the practical and intellectual aspects of the workshops and on the written papers that emerged. She should be regarded as one of the special guest editors for no. 1 also, and was omitted by an unfortunate oversight in a last-minute correction.

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Additional Note: Note that corrected PDF files of the contributions by Standish, Hughes-Freeland, and du Perron and Magriel from vol. 20, no.1 are posted on the *Oral Tradition* web site, at [www.oraltradition.org](http://www.oraltradition.org).