

Editor's Column

With this issue of *Oral Tradition* we offer our readership a highly diverse group of articles that treat traditions from around the world and from ancient times to the present. Moreover, the contributors take a rich variety of approaches to their subjects, reflecting the mix of disciplines that make up the composite field of studies in oral tradition.

Our first paper, the Albert Lord and Milman Parry Lecture on Oral Tradition for 2009, describes and analyzes the living Sardinian tradition of *mutetu longu*, a competitive performance-poetry in which three to five contestants vie with one another over a topic they are assigned just before the event begins. This article puts to rest a number of presuppositions about the performers, language, and structure of oral poetry, and will have substantial resonance in other areas. For one thing, its author, Paulu Zedda, is an oral poet himself, but also a professor of ethnomusicology at the Università di Cagliari and an orthodontist. Of special value is his demonstration of the remarkably complex language and structure of this improvisatory oral poetry, which is composed extemporaneously and thus cannot be thought through and memorized beforehand. For those who would deny the oral or oral-derived status of certain ancient and medieval poetry on the basis of their sheer complexity, the example of *mutetu longu* stands as an indisputable and non-hypothetical counter-argument. An eCompanion with multiple examples and media fills out Zedda's seminal contribution.

From Sardinia we travel next to the Former Yugoslavia and the South Slavic oral epic, birthplace of the Parry-Lord theory, for a demonstration of how certain ordinary-seeming phrases draw attention to focal characters or events. David Elmer discusses the idiomatic function of such "presentation formulas" as keys to understanding narrative techniques, appending an eCompanion with photos of *guslari* from this tradition. Valentina Pagliai's comparative examination of verbal dueling significantly broadens our conception of the types and functions of this widespread oral traditional activity, illustrating that verbal dueling must be understood as a dialogic form of verbal skillfulness across a diverse range of social contexts, involving a broad spectrum of performers and audiences.

From the firsthand experience of her own fieldwork in the area, Venla Sykäri then considers Cretan *mantinádes*, short oral poems in rhyming couplets, as a multidimensional phenomenon (performative, referential, and textual). Interestingly, this oral traditional poetry has migrated into modern media and even into digital incarnation within text messages. An eCompanion includes several photos of recent as well as earlier *mantináda* events, and an mp3 offers an audio performance from the year 2000. John Eastlake's discussion of *The Islandman* by Tomás Ó Criomhthain, the first autobiography published by a member of the Irish-speaking community on Great Blasket Island, looks at both sides of that orally sourced text. From a perspective that will have ramifications for works from other locales, Eastlake points out that textual authorship and oral community are not incompatible but interactive.

Based on decades of fieldwork among the Themne of Sierra Leone, Amadu Wurie Khan next explores what he calls "social aesthetics" in the composition and reception of oral

stories. Among the topics addressed are variation in performance, the role of multimedia, and audience interaction as part of the storytelling event. Echoing articles in a previous issue of *Oral Tradition* [link to issue] devoted to Basque *bertsolaritza*, Asier Barandiaran chronicles what happens to this living, improvisatory contest poetry when it migrates to a non-native social context in the United States. He focuses on four so-called “American *bertsolaris*” and includes an eCompanion with photographs and videos of performances featuring oral traditional singers in the new setting.

The issue closes with three additional articles documenting further variety in international oral traditions. Sam Tsang investigates how an awareness of orality studies can inform the understanding of Paul’s New Testament writings, simulating the envisioned role of the original audience. In a very different venue, Bruno Alonso, Marta Morgade, and David Poveda examine several Spanish storytellers’ views about the audiences they are addressing, with emphasis on the effect of the formal educational system. Finally, Ross Bender’s article treats the transition from orality to literacy as illustrated by the performative nature of edicts from eighth-century Japan.

On the horizon are two special issues of *Oral Tradition*, one entitled “Sound Effects” and dedicated to the long oral-aural history of verbal art in English; and the other a collection treating the role and importance of oral traditions for core texts in Judaism, Islam, and Christianity.

As always, we invite all of our readers to become contributors by sending us their best thinking on the world’s oral traditions. We do all we can to review submissions within 90 days, garnering opinions from both a specialist and a generalist before coming to a decision. In addition, since the journal appears online and free of charge, we can promise you a readership of more than 30,000 in 189 countries and territories. We very much hope you will join the discussion.

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