

Response from an Africanist Scholar

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This response comes from the position of a nonspecialist on the scriptures of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. My own background lies mainly in comparative work on orality, literacy, and communication media, with a focus on oral literature and performance, especially though not exclusively in Africa. Like other conference participants I too have been tussling with the “written text” paradigm, but begin from relative ignorance of the specialist fields covered here.

Because of this unfamiliarity I found the papers all the more fascinating, not only as a wonderful introduction to a substantial body of interrelated work but because certain themes seemed to emerge so clearly. These struck me as having interesting parallels with developments in oral literary studies in Africa, something that I have recently spent some time tracing (Finnegan 2007 and 2010). I will take this overlap as the starting point for my remarks.¹

From Uniformity to Multiplicity

Recent work on oral and written expression in Africa has seen a move away from the broad sweeps once typical of much conventional wisdom. In earlier decades it seemed self-evident that Africa was the home of tribal allegiances and undifferentiated “oral tradition.” Its pervasive “oral culture” would in due course be swept away by that of literacy, just as would primitiveness by civilization, tradition by modernity. These were patterns that scholars could confidently chart in general terms, a recognized framework for their studies. Today the emphasis is more often on cultural-historical specifics. Scholars now incline less towards the uniformities than the diversities, seeing not a generalized African “response” to external intrusion or some impersonal advance forward out of the syndrome of “orality,” but human actions, multiple voices, and many diverse parties in play. Recent studies have been uncovering successive and variegated struggles for control, whether over schools, access to political power, or the right to foreground particular formulations and cultural artifacts.

¹ My brief was to respond to papers on the first day, but since all had been circulated in advance I ventured to include occasional references to later papers also. Given that this is a personal response rather than a substantive paper, I have been sparing with references (recent bibliographies on oral and written expression in Africa can be found in Barber 2007 and Finnegan 2007).

Strikingly similar approaches emerge in many of the papers here. Rather than broad statements about orality and its contrasts with written text, or even about the narrower concept of “oral-scribal dimensions,” the authors bring out the actions of particular parties and the competitions for control over ideas or texts. Within Islam Gregor Schoeler points to Muhammad’s companions and later caliphs wanting private copies and collections, with material suitable to themselves. We hear of Caliph Uthman commissioning an official edition of Koranic text as part of his political project, sending out exemplar copies to provincial capitals and ordering other collections to be destroyed, countering the power of Koranic reciters as the holders of tradition. Nor, it seems, were contests for authority over the text confined to that period, for we hear too of the contending positions of different regions or groups in later centuries over the vocalization of the Koranic text, or, from Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych, of highly charged competition among scholars and poets in post-classical Arabic-Islamic devotional poetry. Again, Talya Fishman describes the contests over rabbinic powers and over who should vet the chain of tradition and define the boundaries of the canon, with disparate political contests at different historical moments. Similarly, David Nelson depicts how early rabbis in the aftermath of the Temple destruction reshaped theological concepts and ritual, refashioning a particular ideology of the orality of their textual tradition to suit their specific views, while Catherine Hezser shows individual rabbis attempting to monopolize the communications network in the late Roman “culture of mobility” that led to the collection and fixing of rabbinic traditions and, eventually, the written documents. Holly Hearon speaks of the polemics in the early Christian period, not least those over the status of individual speakers and interpreters, and of the competing groups involved. Battles have also long raged over the precise delimitation of the Christian scriptural canon, and both before and after the Council of Trent, of which Kelber properly reminds us, divisive definitions continued. What becomes clear in the way these accounts are presented is that the establishment of authoritative written texts is not being envisaged as some predestined oral-to-literate trajectory, but in each case a historically specific process, shaped by many diverse actors and contests within particular situations—and might indeed have turned out otherwise.

That multiple voices are in play, some still audible, some unheard or at least unheeded, has similarly become a theme in recent studies in Africa, widening the scope of those that can and should be attended to, and complicating any simple story of uniformity. For long it had been presumed that on the one hand it was the analyses of Western scholars that held authority and should be listened to, on the other that the material to be investigated essentially comprised the collective tribal tradition of “authentic,” “age-old,” and isolated Africa before the unsettling intrusion of external forces. The trend now, however, is to include local scholars and competing interpretations within the realm of knowledge. At the same time it is no longer just “traditional,” rural, and quintessentially “oral” practices that are considered worthy of account but also, and increasingly, urban experiences, written forms, and popular media,² and, amidst all this, the presence of differing and divisive voices. It has been interesting to note the similar pressure towards widening the scope of study here, like Richard Horsley’s emphasis on popular

² See for example, Barber 1997, 2007, Ricard and Swanepoel 1997, as well as further references in Finnegan 2007:2-3, 179 ff.

movements (not just the cultural elite) and Holly Hearon's on the input (and challenges) from a range of "ordinary," not necessarily intellectual and literate, voices—and her pertinent question of whose voices were heard, whose silenced.

An increasing awareness of a host of multiple actors also comes from another angle. Many recent studies of African oral literature engage with issues of performance and, alongside that, portray audiences as co-creators, directing attention to a wider range of diverse voices than just composers or front performers—or, indeed, just authors or scribes. A parallel inclusiveness runs through several papers here, similarly interacting with current transdisciplinary interests in performance and in processual studies of textuality.³ This recurrent perspective comes through, for example, in Angelika Neuwirth's elucidation of the dialogic processes in early Koranic performances and John Miles Foley's perceptive unwrapping of the multiple creators in "distributed authorship."

I find these parallels in approach both informative and reassuring. They certainly reinforce my appreciation of the fruitfulness of moving away from generalized assertions to more focused insights into multiple historical and culturally specific diversities, and the active interaction—and contests—of many participants whose presence has sometimes in the past, and for a variety of reasons, been brushed aside.

The Elusiveness of "Orality"

African studies today are at the same time characterized by a more carefully nuanced approach to "the oral" than in earlier years. Certainly there are debates and differing viewpoints, but by and large there is a trend towards questioning whether terms like oralism, orality, oral culture, oral biosphere, and so on can readily direct us to some uniform range of properties. Rather, as also emerges in the papers here, it is acknowledged that there are many different ways of being "oral," and diverse relations and overlaps between oral and written.

This variety comes through in part from the many different ways words are described as being delivered: read, recited, sung, cantillated, chanted, declaimed, multimodally performed, communicated through audio recordings or the web, experienced in the sonic memory. They can be individually or collectively enacted, informal or liturgical, public or private, announcements by one person or dialectical engagement. Hearon's account takes us vividly through a variety of oral communication in the first century CE: speeches declaimed, crowds addressed by public officials, teaching delivered, issues debated, messages proclaimed, stories told, news passed on and discussed, written matter read aloud, and much else. We hear of a plethora of channels and settings, each with its own specificities, for which generalized characterization would be naïve. Just saying "oral" is no longer sufficient.

Similarly, both in Africa and here attention is drawn to the many twists in the forms of transmission. Just what it is that is "transmitted" is not always the same: exact words; gist; paraphrase; sound; recognized cultural traditions; repertoires Diversities emerge too over

³ Notably by such scholars as John Miles Foley, Lauri Honko, Richard Bauman, Richard Schechner, and the influential *Oral Tradition* journal, all 25 years of which are now available online at <http://journal.oraltradition.org> (further references in Finnegan 2007:189 ff., Barber 2007:137 ff.).

the processes of memorization (a number of them interestingly illustrated in David Carr's paper) as well as the purposes of transmission and how these are acknowledged and organized (systematically, informally, in schools, learned through a master, through some formal transmission chain). There are differences as well in how an accredited original source is conceptualized: sometimes as oral communication direct from God or prophet, sometimes as the knowledge and creation of expert authorities, or just as a matter of general knowledge. Whatever the precise channel and its evaluation, its characteristics cannot, it emerges, be predicted from some label of "oral" but must, as the papers here demonstrate, be uncovered with a careful eye to the specificities.

In the current approaches, oral and written are no longer automatically viewed as antagonistic or mutually exclusive. Written textuality is now commonly presented in its engagement with aural/oral modes and performances (and vice versa), and not just as an interaction of separate modes but also as merging, overlapping, or mutually working together as different sides of the same coin. Kelber speaks of oral/written "interpenetration," Hearon of the "intersection" of spoken and written words, Nelson of "oral-literary dynamics" and the "oral-circulatory conceptualization of Rabbinic textual evidence."⁴ Hearon aptly quotes Quintilian on the inseparable connection of writing, reading, and speaking. This intertwining, it appears, takes many forms. A written text can be a transcript capturing (more or less) some spoken performance; written from dictation; related to oral delivery whether as *aide-mémoire* (notes, paraphrase, text, unofficial jottings), or as a full text (locally defined as such, that is) for enunciation in some approved manner and recognized situation. Rendering a written text aloud—in variously designated settings and for more, or less, restricted audiences—is one common pattern, as in the lector chanting from written text for public display. And then there is Neuwirth's nuanced analysis of the intertextuality and dramatic polyphony of oral dialectic, constrained in different ways when captured into a fixed order in the written Koran. "Reading" too is an elusive and varied term. We hear of differing degrees of scope for readers and reciters of the Koran, for example, and varying conceptualizations of the relation of written text and reader. The *ḥadīth* is described as not disseminated for word-for-word reading but for oral lectures, and early rabbinic texts as used less for linear reading than as provisional script for future oral performances. We hear too of the material codex or hard copy book as essentially for display or symbol rather than for reading as such (as in Priscilla Soucek's account of the veneration of the Koran as sacred object⁵), and varying views on the significance of spoken interpretations and performances.

The term "oral," which at one time seemed so clear, emerges not as some single quality but as overlapping or intermingled in varying ways with other modes (visual, acoustic, tactile, material, olfactory). Liturgical contexts provide good illustrations, while the multisensory potential of live delivery also comes out in David Nelson's account of recitations of the Exodus narrative as multi-dimensional ritual process rather than purely textual undertaking, and was vividly demonstrated in David Rhoads' performance during the conference showing how oral enactment might (or on occasion might not) involve not just words but gestures, stances, vocal

⁴ This presentation from the Rice conference is not included in the present issue.

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modulations, material props, or dramatization. Nor does it stop with the fleeting flows of the verbal, for this dimension in turn can interweave with calligraphic, pictorial, and material images (colorfully illustrated in Soucek's paper), the more profoundly meaningful for their religious connotations.

Once again the approach is no longer in terms of some apparently uniform "orality" or of the "mystique of the oral" that John Miles Foley warns us against. Rather we learn of the multiple—and fascinating—ways in which humans have made use of vocalized and verbal media in varying combinations with other media, in differing cultural contexts and to differing purposes.

Fading Influence of Teleological Models?

Alongside the written-text model that is already so much in question and perhaps equally far-reaching, stand the teleological and evolutionary paradigms that have for many years run across much humanistic study. By this terminology I refer in part to the widespread impulse to argue back from hindsight, but also to that linked set of assumptions that picture some natural line of development, as from oral to written, primitive to civilized, sometimes linked to the impact of successively developing technologies. There have undoubtedly been variant forms of these assumptions, but underlying many of them is—to put it succinctly—a vision of historical developments as predestined and one-way. Perhaps nowhere has this framework been more influential than in the interpretation of Africa and its expressive arts, with the vision of the West leading "traditional" and "oral" Africa upward toward a foreordained literate fulfillment, above all the pinnacle of alphabetic print attained by European civilization.

The cruder versions of such paradigms are now of course under widespread attack both for their West-centered ethnocentricity and their oversimplifications. Within African studies the "grand story" is no longer universally accepted as either inevitable or accurate. Teleological interpretations retain a powerful attraction, however, whether for Africa or more comparatively, at times still implicitly linked into the grander evolutionary timescales. They are perhaps especially resonant in the religious sphere, where it seems particularly apt, in the words of the much-loved Christian hymn, to envisage God "working his purpose out as year succeeds to year." It has seemed natural to bring a similar perspective to the canonizing of sacred texts, the more so given the pervading influence of philological textual models in the study of the monotheistic religions. We picture the "early" or "formative" incipient forms foreshadowing the final outcome: first oral precursors, then perhaps partial or unsystematic written versions, then onward to the final apotheosis into writing. In the apparently inevitable Western path toward literacy, the fulfillment can readily be envisaged as that of fully written and authorized text, the standard and correct canon, by now above the battle.

It is a seductive set of images, the more persuasive for their religious associations and, in a sense, celebratory overtones. So it is striking to see so many papers emphasizing the dangers of hindsight, of teleological thinking, and of the anachronisms of reading back later developments or defining earlier formulations in the terms of more recent canons or modern, print-dominated definitions. The canonization of many sacred texts in the form they now circulate (or are

supposed by some authorities to circulate) was not after all, it now seems, a predetermined result; nor indeed are the canons as undisputed as some earlier accounts might imply. Certainly there have been points at which sacred texts apparently became more definitively fixed—among certain powerful parties and for certain purposes, that is—and this textual stabilization and the influence of print are indeed features of great significance. But, tempting as it may seem to view it this way, history did not then, as it were, come to a full stop. Diversities and textual instabilities in one or another respect continue. As Foley points out these supposedly “final” versions have often been in practice inaccessible to the majority, and there are still disagreements over what counts as the canon and who has authority. Scriptural texts are defined and handled in different ways by different groups and on different occasions.

One notable aspect is the continuing *oral* presence of sacred words, a presence too often obscured in evolutionist paradigms. As Foley rightly emphasizes, oral expression remains important, with variegated oral-written interactions a pervasive feature of the contemporary world. Thus we *can* present the Bible or other sacred text as comprehensive finalized written text, a model that may indeed be reflected (at least in part) in the practices of theologians, academics, and religious specialists; such a concept also undoubtedly carries far-reaching symbolic connotations. But for most people an equally important medium, perhaps the principal one, is oral/aural: hearing or reading aloud among gathered congregations or listening to broadcast or recorded performances, supplemented by repeatedly vocalized passages and phrases in sermons, prayers, liturgy, and hymns. Werner Kelber well describes the centuries-long recognition of the Bible as oral authority—proclaimed, expounded, listened to, internalized. The same pattern is not totally absent today. Biblical text circulates orally in both religious and non-religious contexts through quotations and allusions in conversation, popular song, and widespread biblical imagery. The scriptures can be said to exist not just in formalized verbal text between hard covers, the dimension on which print-based scholars naturally fix their eyes, but also in an oral mode. Though different in detail, something of the same might be said for Islamic sacred text. I vividly recall my first encounter with Islam: hearing a group of young boys chanting around an evening fire during fieldwork in up-country Sierra Leone. There was no way they were *reading* the text, nor were they likely ever to do so (nor probably their teacher either): for them their engagement with the sacred text was an oral one. As was brought out in William Graham’s illuminating *Beyond the Written Word* (1987) as in more recent papers, the Koran has long had an oral as well as written dimension, its acoustic substance existent in people’s sonic memories as much as, perhaps more than, in visual text.

And even for written scripture there remain diversities and changing practices, with boundaries constantly contested. As Kelber points out, the establishment of print did not prevent plural versions or contending interpretations, indeed in some ways encouraged them. Many are the translations too, especially of biblical text, with their own wordings and emphases (I think of the fraught choice in my own church of which translation to adopt for the pulpit bible—the differences mattered!). The crystallization of sacred text may indeed be one notable dimension of the three “religions of the book,” but it is by no means a smooth one-way pathway leading to the establishment of some true and timeless text, but rather a history of recurrent adaptation, of contests, of repressions, and of struggles for authority.

The complexities and contests evident in the contemporary world, whether African or European, can, perhaps, facilitate a clearer view of earlier periods. They warn of the dangers both of too ready an acceptance of certain teleological stories (not least, we might suggest, those associated with a theologically resonating textual paradigm?), and of reading back not only from more recent times but also, equally misleadingly, from a partial view of the present and how it has come about.

Epistemologies of Oral and Written

In what does the existence of verbal formulations lie? The question seems inescapable both in the papers here and in current issues within African studies. For textually trained scholars it has seemed obvious to approach all verbal practices through a “textual ideology” (as Foley terms it). Kelber equally aptly speaks of the “typographical captivity” that tends to dominate our thinking. Certainly that was the paradigm from which I, and many others, first engaged in the study of oral literary forms in Africa. Writing was, surely, the way to pin down these forms, transcribed into one-line text on a page. That indeed seemed the fundamental mode in which they unquestionably had their “real” substance.

That powerful model has not totally gone away. But new technologies, not least electronic, are unsettling our idea of stable, finalized, and closed text, and as Foley so well explains we now have new ways of capturing and disseminating verbal forms, giving us a new take on their ontology. Equally important, the rise of what could summarily be referred to as “performance studies” has radically altered how many scholars now regard such forms. From this perspective, well exemplified in Rhoads’ description and performance during the conference, the substance is found not on the textualized page but in multimodal performance—embodied, situational, and dialogic. Current interests in usage and practice raise similar questions about where the essential reality lies. So what, I now ask myself, did I ultimately encounter when I heard those young boys recite in that far-off Sierra Leone village, and for whom—the “original” Koranic text? The direct words of Allah? The ephemeral sounds and understandings of performance? The terms in which they and/or their teacher conceptualized or experienced them? All of these? We now raise questions that before seemed closed off about the varying ways in which verbal formulations are conceived and hierarchized, by whom, in what situations, and to whose interest(s).

The papers here finely demonstrate the point of tackling such issues. We hear of the disputes surrounding the arguably dual reality of the Koran as both oral and written, of the resistance to committing the *hadith* to writing, and, in Neuwirth’s comments, of the relation between the situatedness of Muhammad’s recitation and the vision of transcendent celestial book with its “glow of scripturality.” Among the issues around the Torah was the “epistemological hierarchy” of talmudic texts, with disputes over the status of the “oral Torah” and whether authority lay in the text or in the active practice of the tradition, once again with interested parties taking different positions. Along the same lines too are the differing views over the status and role of writing: as necessary evil; as paramount or at least as possessing preeminent symbolic force; or as merely mnemonic aid for the “real” thing, recitation.

The differing viewpoints have become not just debates among ourselves but part of our subject matter. Fishman charts epistemological rivalries within Judaism and how rabbinic valorizing of oral expression worked out in different periods and for differing purposes, with specific views about how “oral matters” were to be distinguished from “written matters” and how treated. Nelson similarly depicts early rabbis constructing a particular ideology about the orality of their textual tradition, privileging the elaborate ideological myth of the “Torah in the Mouth.” Schoeler’s account reveals the arguments about the relative importance of orally transmitted teachings and written text as in part a contest over epistemology, while Hearon comments on the authority of governmental or scriptural written forms, and how they worked as symbols.

Clearly there have been diverse viewpoints in differing historical periods, cultural settings, and, no doubt, specific interest groups with their contending claims; nor, significantly, have the practices always been in accord with the overtly dominating ideologies. As Hearon pertinently remarks, the fact that something is written says little; we must also understand how the particular written word is viewed and engaged. As so well illustrated in the papers, the varying and sometimes clashing ideologies are often enough loaded and highly emotive, entangled as they are with issues of authority and control. These culturally and historically specific epistemologies are both fascinating in themselves and now recognized as part of the subject of study.

Multi-literacies and Multi-oralities?

The conference organizers raised the question of whether the philological-textual paradigm that has in the past proved such a rich intellectual matrix for approaching the monotheistic religions can now be supplemented by new challenges and insights from the viewpoint of orality and literacy studies. Is a new paradigm emerging?

My conclusion was in one sense no. Certainly contributors seemed to agree in querying, even explicitly rejecting, a “written-text” paradigm as *the* universal and somehow natural model for all verbalized formulations. This could be called a negative position, then, rather than some new paradigm. But like other critical rethinking of powerfully tenacious assumptions, that shared approach is by no means worthless. It has given rise to much valuable work and, whether regarded as newly emergent or already established, is a welcome feature of the conference papers.

And perhaps it is more than just a negative. For it interacts positively with developments in other fields, in particular the burgeoning field of literacy studies with their deconstruction of the seemingly transparent concept of “writing”: not just something neutral and obvious, after all, but something to be analyzed and studied in its variegated social settings. In contrast to the generalized polarities of traditional “Great Divide” theories, comparative scholarship both in Africa and elsewhere is now focusing on the *diverse* usages and evaluations of writing, its differing forms, purposes, settings, clashing definitions, interactions with other media, and entanglements with the hierarchies and ideologies of the social order. One trend now is to speak not of “literacy” but of “literacies” and “multi-literacies”—shorthand terms to sum up a critical

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