

Oral, but Oral What? The Nomenclatures of Orality and Their Implications

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I

When I first noticed the announcement of the impending appearance of a journal to be named *Oral Tradition*, I was intrigued and gratified. As a historian I looked forward to welcoming a scholarly journal which would be devoted entirely to addressing issues of interest to students of oral societies, be they of the present or the past. When I later saw a list of the members of the Editorial Board, I was disappointed and disquieted to find not a single historian among them.

But as I contemplated what seemed an unwelcome turn of events, I realized that my first reaction had been reflexive and had been based on a perception which was neither mainstream nor necessarily beyond cavil. It seemed in fact that the issue had two distinct levels: one was that of nomenclature, the other a matter of attitude and operation. The two levels are hardly discrete, however; a great deal of osmosis takes place between them. On these grounds perhaps a few words on each might be in order, if only to initiate what could be a useful (and, I would argue, needed) colloquy.

In the past twenty-five years or so, “orality” has come into its own as a legitimate field of concern in a number of disciplines, including history—both the history of oral societies in various parts of the world and of the “underside” of contemporary history in “western” societies. It has also become of great interest to scholars in literature, psychology, anthropology, philosophy, and several other fields. It is no surprise then that, along the way, a number of distinct (and not so distinct) terms have sprung up to denote the various bodies of data being studied; but few, if any, of these

have managed either to capture the day or to convey unambiguously their focus and intent.

For instance, the terms “oral data” and “oral materials” are frequently used in one context or another, but have never been able to establish an out-of-context domain of their own in the lexicography. Perhaps they are too general, too vague, or simply too drab formulations to be able to live a life of their own successfully.

“Oral literature” on the other hand appears to be used quite frequently to describe—what? Anything from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, known to us only in their written forms, to oral recitations which, if ever written down at all, have been committed to writing only by modern students interested in them. “Oral literature” has also been used to describe the entire spectrum from unabashed stories, with no other aim but the amusement of the moment, to purportedly historical texts wielded for political advantage from one generation to the next. Finally, the term suffers an additional double handicap. It is oxymoronic to those etymologically inclined, who object that, by definition, “literature” cannot be oral; therefore there can be no “oral literature.”

This is a quibble, worth mentioning but not worrying about, but the second handicap is more serious, at least from the point of view of the historian. This is the fact that historians, although they often (although perhaps not often enough) use written literature as historical sources, almost always fail to consider the literary (and indeed the oral) aspects of more explicitly historical sources (chronicles, biographies, narrative accounts of the past, and the like). That is, they neglect to place such writings of the past into their particular ambiances in order better to appreciate the conventions that governed their creation and form. The result is often either needless anachronism, undue credulity, or both.

“Oral poetry” at least is a term that is relatively clearly defined, to the extent, that is, that “poetry” itself is able to conjure images of a genre of expression with specific aims and particular forms. Here one problem is that, while many historians define “poetry” in such a way as practically to eliminate examples of it as potentially useful historical sources, many societies do not. Yet no source has been more thoroughly plumbed for possible historical content than the *Iliad*. So there is a paradox here as well.

Conversely, and somewhat oddly perhaps, “oral history” seems to be the single term that has managed to secure for itself a distinctive niche in this nomenclatural welter—odd, because in doing so it has given the term “history” an unusual new twist. To almost everyone, practitioners and observers alike, “oral history” nowadays refers to the practice of eliciting life histories, personal reminiscences from participants in events of note or simply from everyday people whose views, it is thought, can provide a needed antidote to an overly elitist perspective in most historiography. In this sense then, “oral history” scarcely deals with the past at all, but only with the length and breadth of the present generation.¹

Finally we reach the term “oral tradition,” to which I will give more extended attention, if only because my own background permits it and because it is the most widely—and variously—used term in the field. As an Africanist historian by training, interested in how non-literate societies were able (if able at all) to preserve memories of their past, I have probably been most influenced by the definition of “oral tradition” propounded by Jan Vansina in his book of the same name.² Trained as a medievalist, Vansina recognized that oral materials could be of potential value to historians, whether proverbs, poetry/songs, lengthy historicized texts, or epics. He urged historians to regard these materials in much the same way as they had traditionally regarded written documents—as capable of being exploited for both direct and indirect historical information.

Numberless historians during the next two decades, in Africa and elsewhere, followed this advice as they swarmed out among oral (or formerly oral) societies, collecting “texts” and subjecting them to analysis. In this process they developed both new views as to the historicity of the oral past and new ways and means of collecting and interpreting oral data, whatever their apparent nature. Responding to, and benefiting from, all this work, Vansina revised (or rather rewrote) his text, and in doing so provided it with a new title, *Oral Tradition as History*, to emphasize that he felt that the work done in the intervening twenty-five years had authenticated the use of oral materials as historical sources.³ Even so, in *Oral Tradition as History*, Vansina defined oral traditions as “documents of the *present*” which “also embody a message from the past,” recognizing the ineluctably Manichaean duality that bedevils oral data *when treated as historical sources*.⁴

I have myself tried to delimit “oral tradition(s)” as a genre by arguing that, regardless of their historicity, to qualify for that sobriquet, materials should have been transmitted over several generations and to some extent be the common property of a group of people.⁵ I did this primarily in order to distinguish it from “testimony,” which, by virtue of being the property of only a few individuals, seemed to me to lack the cachet (if sometimes dubious) that widespread belief and common acceptance grant to “oral tradition.” Other historians have also given specific attention to defining “oral tradition” but few, if any, have used in their own work other terms to characterize the materials with which they have worked.

While the term has thus gained the overwhelming loyalty of historians, it is only one of many terms used by other students of orality. And when used by these latter, more often than not “oral tradition” refers to matter whose *historical* value is minimal. In other words, when the term appears in print, it becomes necessary to know who is using it in order to understand how it is likely to be intended. And while such a circumstance is frequently the case in scholarly discourse, this is by itself no reason why it should be ignored as a problem.

II

But nomenclatural difficulties often betray more substantive differences among those who seek greater or lesser truths. In fact such difficulties can be regarded as windows on less visible issues, in this case the disparity of *attitudes* towards oral materials. And here differences among disciplines come directly into play. Any text, whether it be written, oral, or even visual, is likely to provide different stimuli, depending on the needs and goals of those consulting it. In this respect it is possible to see marked differences in the ways that historians and others (to make a purely invidious dichotomy) treat, or wish to treat, oral materials.

Most historians commit themselves to seek their ends by attempting to understand as much as they can about what happened in the past and then by explaining why just those things happened and not any number of other things. In order to accomplish this, of course, they need first to discover sources for past events in which they can believe, and after that to ransack these sources for every bit of information that they construe (rightly or wrongly) as referring, directly or indirectly, to events

that actually took place, people who really existed, conditions that actually prevailed. Because of this primary goal⁶ they tend to look at oral data quite differently, and in fact, often quite contrarily to, say, literary scholars.

The latter are intensely interested in such things as habits of expression or intimations of creative behavior or the effects of audience response. On the other hand historians—wrongly in most cases, I think—are reluctant to deal with any of these issues or ones like them. For instance, they can hardly—or should hardly—address the effects of performance on an oral text without confronting the inevitable, and inevitably unwelcome, results that such ruminations have on the goal of coming into contact with a real past. Ironically, although the bread and butter of historical inquiry is to discern and explain change, historians cannot abide the possibility of indeterminable changes in their own sources.

For historians, then, the vaunted superiority of the written word is less owing to their belief that somehow the ability to write enhances the ability to perceive and record the truth, than it is to the fact that, whether “right” or “wrong,” the written word remains comfortingly unchanging over time, even if the ability to interpret it well often changes.

Historians who wish to believe in the historicity of the Trojan War must regard the *Iliad* either as dating from a time very close to such an event or as having been transmitted for several centuries virtually unchanged.⁷ Conversely, literary historians seldom believe that they have grounds for the second belief and so, while they might not reject the notion that the *Iliad* has a germ of more or less accurate recollection of a “Trojan War,” they would not be fain to suggest that this germ—even if it could be isolated—would be likely to serve as an accurate marker of specific historical events.⁸ For them the *Iliad* is interesting above all as a literary, or rather literizing, composition, possibly as the culmination of a long period of orality which finally coalesced (with the “how” being more important than the “when” though hardly separated from it) into written form. For historians, the poem’s value depends almost entirely on the extent to which they can tease out what they regard as specific historical information. And this in turn involves posing a largely differing set of questions.

In a sense this brings us back to the matter of nomenclature. For, if historians are pleased to argue that the *Iliad* can tell us something substantial about a place called Ilium in a time about

the beginning of the twelfth century B.C., they would portray it as “oral tradition” because it managed to convey historical information over some period of time to a point at which it was recorded. In that respect it was not unlike the kinds of information historians collect (or like to think they collect) in oral societies. To the extent that they grant historical value to the *Iliad*, they are also granting validity to the results of their own work.

But if the argument is accepted that, whatever historical insights the *Iliad* might provide, they relate to contemporary, probably eighth-century B.C., times, then historians—if I read them right—would think of the *Iliad*, or at least parts of it, as “oral literature,” or even “oral history.” It may have been widely known, but it was not transmitted as an unchanging text over any period of time (and so should probably not be referred to as “it”. . .). By changing, by becoming a text more influenced by a continuing present than by a receding past, any oral *Iliad* forfeits being termed “oral tradition,” as historians are accustomed to use the term.

A further nomenclatural issue with procedural implications relates to the effects that the mere passing of time might have on terminology. To take one example, historians in the eleventh and twelfth centuries (and in some cases the twentieth century) regarded much of the Icelandic saga literature as historical, and therefore as having been “oral tradition.” Nowadays the tendency is to regard much of this material—that which dealt with Scandinavia rather than Iceland—as less an attempt to record and preserve the past accurately than as a form of literary expression that used real or putative historical events as points of departure—*raisons d’être* for literary composition, not unlike the *Iliad* or the *Chanson de Roland* or the Puranic texts of early India.

It proved difficult for nineteenth-century Nordic historians to reject the sagas and their counterparts as essentially historical texts because they wanted very much to believe what they said—nationalism served well to dull their critical faculties. As a result not a few intellectual gymnastics went into attempting to demonstrate how oral societies could, and did, go to great lengths to train specialists whose only function was to receive, memorize, and transmit in unchanged form stories (or, if you will, records) from the ever more remote and meaningless past.⁹ As nationalism, at least Nordic nationalism, ebbed in this century, some historians, but more often literary critics, demonstrated the exiguity of this

point of view.¹⁰ Consequently, the general (but hardly universal) belief today is that it is not really possible, however desirable, to posit a long history of unified kingship in, say, Sweden before the tenth century on the basis of the *Ynglinga* saga or similar compositions of much later provenance.¹¹

III

These hard lessons resulted from, among other things, the greater—or at least the quicker—willingness of literary scholars to drink from the cup of comparison by drawing on work from one time or place in order to suggest tenable hypotheses for studying another time and place. Perhaps owing to the great mass of documentation available for their perusal, historians were rather less interested and less willing to draw on work done outside their own specialized interests, particularly if carried out among “primitive” societies. After all, they had sources galore which seemed quite capable of speaking for themselves after a little prodding. Of what possible interest could work in darkest Africa have for historians of Anglo-Saxon England (to cite but one of any number of possible permutations)? Indeed it was (and still is) common to regard historians of oral societies as species of anthropological wolf in sheep’s clothing. Although not yet fully dead and buried, this notion has begun to give way to accepting the value of understanding not only the work of other historians in apparently remote pastures, but also of scholars from other disciplines, once thought of as bearing little relationship to historical inquiry.

But much remains to be done, and it still is not easy to see where the most likely meeting ground would be in this conflict of opinion. The differences are not only procedural but broadly philosophical as well. No group of scholars willingly rejects its sources, and historians are no exception. Moreover, as I suggested earlier, seeing at least some oral texts as fundamentally unhistorical, because of their propensity to change as time passes, undermines an entire ethic that has developed in at least one group of oral historians in the past few scholarly generations.¹² But, if a meeting of minds is not in the cards, a colloquy in which the respective arguments are made on behalf of, and as a result of input from, all contending parties is likely at least to crystallize discussion, eliminate the wearying repetition of stale arguments, and introduce comparative insights and issues.¹³

To this end the appearance of *Oral Tradition*, which promises to be eclectic in its content and approach, and which, it is hoped, will attract an audience at least as eclectic in its interests, bodes well for continuing and intensifying the study of oral data from and about the past, no matter what we care to call them. In its pages psychologists will be able to talk to historians, historians to literary critics, literary critics to Biblical scholars. . . . The present piece is intended as no more than an introductory salvo to such a polylog, and in it I hope that I have raised points that will strike the interest of all parties.

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Notes

¹Not that oral history is entirely without its problems in this respect. See, for instance, Morrissey 1984. However, the *International Journal of Oral History* seldom belies its title by publishing studies which fall outside this more or less contemporary framework, particularly insofar as they relate to anti-elitist life histories.

²See Vansina 1965.

³See Vansina 1985.

⁴Vansina 1985:xii, with emphasis in the original.

⁵See Henige 1982:2-3.

⁶Of course some historians have become as interested in why their sources say what they (appear to) say as in that which is said, but this welcome departure cannot yet be said to be a trend, either among practitioners of oral history or among historians of oral societies. Perhaps it will never be, since in this case historians are co-creators of their own sources, a fact that is bound to inhibit their willingness—and certainly their ability—to question them as they might another body of materials.

⁷Whereas the Homeric compositions have been unceasingly subjected to scrutiny (not always critical scrutiny of course) for two centuries or more, the Vedic hymns and Puranic texts from early India have largely been the subject of pious attention, and the belief is still nearly universal that these texts (particularly the Vedic hymns) were “carried down in the memory for thousands of years” before being written down in precisely the form in which they had first been composed (see Roy 1977:8). Probably because the Vedic materials are regarded as scriptures, all arguments have been on their behalf rather than on behalf of the balance of evidence. For other studies on this issue, see Majumdar 1952:225-41. These discussions occur in a methodological vacuum, untainted by work done on similar materials. Consequently the same assertions and the same arguments recur endlessly.

⁸See Morris 1986.

⁹The idea that oral societies were typically interested enough in preserving and transmitting the details of an ever-growing and more cumbersome record of the past to create such classes of specialists to do just this was (is) of course not confined to Scandinavia, but was a part of the posture of accepting oral data as historically accurate in Oceania, parts of Africa, India, and elsewhere. It is a belief that can never be demonstrated, but a useful belief nonetheless.

¹⁰Early in this century Lauritz Weibull was one of the first to cast into doubt the intrinsic historical value of the *Heimskringla* and other sagas, and in so doing he aroused heated animosity on the part of his colleagues who did not care to have their illusions assaulted by means of textual criticism. See Arvidsson et al. 1977, and more generally, Kristjánsson 1975.

¹¹The views on the Vedic and Puranic materials mentioned in note 7 are much imbued with the idea of Indian nationalism and/or Aryan purity and seem to reflect quite closely both the content and inspiration of the debate in Scandinavia and elsewhere in the nineteenth century. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*

¹²I refer to the dismayingly large number of Africanist historians who are determined to believe whatever their oral sources seem to tell them and to compound the problem by declining to place these materials into the public domain where they belong. On this point see Henige 1980.

¹³Several interesting studies which demonstrate the efficacy of the multi-disciplinary approach are to be found in Congrès 1983.

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