

Six Proposals for an "Ethnography of the Performed Word": Afterthoughts on Reading Martin Gaenzle's Review Article on the Study of Oral Ritual Texts

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The recent studies reviewed by Gaenzle (1992, in this volume) remind us of how little we know of the rich tradition of oral ritual texts (and oral tradition in general) in the Central Himalayas. In addition, our general approach is deficient in that we tend to neglect the orality such texts "live by", and treat what is spoken and performed as if it were something that had been written to be read. That the "science of the spoken word" as called for by Dennis Tedlock (1983) is still in its infancy, and that even "linguists begin their work by disposing of the voice, committing to writing only those aspects of oral performance that are most comfortably noted by alphabetic writing" (Tedlock 1980: 828), has evidently much to do with our own Western tradition: with the distinctions we make between "content" and "form", "message" and "aesthetics", "libretto" and "musical delivery", "script" and "performance", "word" and "sound", "doctrine" and "poetics"...

In response to Gaenzle, who concludes his stimulating paper by asking how we anthropologists should collect and present ritual texts, the following proposals (1) may be made:

1. The hypertrophy that the "text" as a notion has undergone in poststructuralist theory (for which the kind of texts we deal with are just "antiquarian set pieces", "quotes" from a native past (2) or from an endless murmuring of "es spricht") should not prevent us from valuing ritual recitations as texts in their own right, as works of orature.

What we need at first is the documentation of complete texts, rather than fragments of texts inserted in our own meta-text as particularly striking pieces of evidence.

2. Unless impossible for technical reasons, texts should be recorded *in situ*, i.e., in the in-performance situation. As experience shows, their reproduction *in vitro* is likely to confuse or even embarrass the informant asked to dictate, phrase by phrase and "in prose", a text which he has memorized, and is used to perform, in a chanted form only. Indoor, studio-recording of a chanted version by the ethnographer might be objected on grounds that it would be inauspicious to recite such and such a text outside the ritual framework and/or without a tradition-sanctioned occasion. In any case, artificial reproduction - whether dictated or chanted - necessarily results in an artificial product because it is only through the manifold and often subtle interaction between the reciter and his audience that an oral text becomes what it is *sui generis*: something *performed*, staged, represented, acted out and thus also interpreted, of course. This interaction may be said to be intrinsic not least because it has a bearing on both morphology and meaning. (3) The dynamics of phraseology and diction in the "composition-in-performance"; the indexical links between words and gestures (ritual acts); the persuasive reinforcement or even reinterpretation words may receive by their actual articulation (prosody, musical modulation or

accompaniment); the performer's parabolic comments which often interpret his own interpretation; etc. are all functionally dependent on the (tacit or open) reaction by the audience at a given place and time, and can provide, vice versa, a powerful tool of influencing the audience accordingly.

3. Consequently, the recitation of oral texts should be recorded as an essentially theatrical event in a multi-medial performance. One should pay attention to those processes through which the essentially digital code of the verbal language becomes complemented or even supplanted by the analogical code of acoustic and visual gestures of the "spatial language" in the delivery. (4) Visual (video or film) documentation in the field should not be restricted to the ritual acts themselves, but also seize on the individual behaviour of the performer and the participants, since any detail may turn out to be relevant for the understanding of a text's nature, intentionality and meaning. The same is true of the acoustic performance as a whole, which we automatically record on tape but unfortunately tend to ignore in our graphical notation. What we write down in neat lines and clear-cut sentences on the white pages of the notebook often "rescues" little more than a fossil. In this way, we reduce the text to a product of the second articulation, as it were, and treat it as a mere string of words, rather than as what it really is: an orchestral partition of speech and sounds. (5) Doing justice to the musicality of the text means more than just documenting melody, rhythm, tempi and the like in the reciter's performance and/or in the instrumental "accompaniment". It also requires a close scrutiny (a) of those

(mantric and other) utterances which are sound acts and speech acts at the same time, and (b) of the individual performer's prosodic presentation. The latter includes the stresses and stops, the pitches and falls in the dynamics of vocal articulation, interjections, whistles, groans - and a number of other chiefly paralinguistic or metalinguistic means that illustratively "onomatopoeize", solemnize or ridicule, highlight or play down, explain what would otherwise remain open to interpretation, and comment on the text's or the performer's own terms of communication.

Evidently, a faithful documentation of a text-performance in its multi-mediality may also provide important empirical clues to the "perlocutionary return" of a text, especially of those texts the recitation of which is designed to have an immediate effect upon reality, such as a psycho-somatic effect in a healing ritual. One may note in passing that this "perlocutionary return" is one of the least explored and most speculatively analyzed issues in anthropological textual pragmatics. We seem to know much more about how a text is structured and intends to effect than about how these structures are likely to structure or re-structure the listener's perception of his self.

4. Anthropologists tend to concentrate on the "official" aspects of ritual and symbolism, and rely mostly on what ritual specialists and other informants recruited from the elite expound as part of "shared belief" or at least "authoritative interpretation". Yet the claim to treat a ritual text as an event, rather than as an isolated monument, implies that the ethnographer should also keep a close eye on the *unstaged*, that is, on what happens (or seems to happen) incidentally, "informally" or peripher-

ally within or around the arena of a given ritual. (6) (a) Among the non-events that merit to be noticed are no doubt the blunders committed by the performer(s). They are to be noted in our publications, along with the emendments the informants contribute later. Mispronunciations; omissions and faulty substitutions; word monsters resulting from unusual republication or elision, narrative sequences that appear confused, redundant or mutilated; and any other kind of arbitrary permutation must be taken seriously - all the more as they might not always be unanimously recognized by our informants as plain "mistakes". First, one never knows at once whether such "mistakes" were intended - say, as a kind of ludic fabrication - by the reciter, or resulted from his "nodding", or yet again from his actual failure to conform to conditions as set by meter, rhythm or melody. Second, intended or not, they may fulfill the function of a rhetorical device (such as tmesis, aposiopesis, aprosdoketon, hapology, etc.) that works "by surprise" and is likely to create a new focus, dismantle an imagery, amplify or dissect an idea. For the audience, certain "mistakes" pose the question whether or to what extent "religious truth" and "poetic exuberance" can coexist, and question the "validity" not only of an individual performance, but also - temporarily at least - of the performer's religious tradition as a whole. Third, whether discomforting for the audience or not, such "mistakes" may be revelatory not only as "Freudian slips", but also as "generic overrides" (7) that lay bare a part of the "genetic programme" underlying the text as a whole; this is the case when blunders turn out to represent anomalies from the conceptual or paradigmatic viewpoint only, while struc-

turally they conform to the organizing principles of the general formulaic setup or the genre-specific imagery. - (b) Furthermore, it is expedient to pay full attention to what happens outside the liturgy and arena of the ritual proper: the conversations (in the breaks or after the ritual) that openly or obliquely evaluate a performance in interpreting an oracle or commenting on the artistic achievement of the individual performer, etc., as well as the spontaneous events (merriment, disputes, outbreak of violence) among both the participants and non-participants. Certain events, especially when they tend to recur regularly, may throw some light not only on the laity's general attitude towards texts and rituals, but also on the interactive processes that are at work in what one may call the self-produced psycholinguistics of a given ritual. The complex Western Tamang death-feasts (characterized, among other things, by the fact that the laymen do not understand what the lamas recite in Tibetan) might provide an example of how important afferent impacts from the periphery may be in the "mourning process". The spontaneous nightly gatherings of young people of either sex indulging in "frivolous" songs and all sorts of fun in the vicinity of (neither too close to, nor too far from) the open-air site of the mortuary ceremonies are much frowned at by the elders and notables as a practice that morally perverts the youth and debases the ritual. On the other hand, there is ample evidence to conclude that such peripheral events, however dysteleological they may appear, do exert a positively "palliative" or even "cathartic" influence on the mourners' feelings at the centre. (8)

5. Only a consistent spelling can warrant the accessibility of one's material to others. "Broad transcriptions" neglecting important linguistic features impede the comparative work yet to be done and should therefore be avoided. If the text is in a language which is written, such as Nepali, etc., it should be given in correct transliteration. (9) For texts in a non-written language, the transcription should be a phonological or basically phonological one. - The transcript of the text should respect the essential properties of its original oral delivery. Although an arrangement in stanzas or cola is certainly more comfortable for the eye and in many cases even justifiable by syntax or meter, it can ignore the autonomy with which the prosody actually intervenes, disjoins a syntactic unit (enjambement) or "compresses" several such units into one, etc. Above all, such regularized typographical patterns are likely to make one forget that oral delivery consists of an alternation of utterances and silences (hiatus, pause), in which the latter might be as important as the former. Needless to add, our publications should also include samples of the musical delivery in the conventional notation.

6. The presentation of our material in publication often proves problematic because we translate from little-known, unwritten languages and interpret texts that are not in plain prose and abound in archaisms and/or metaphors and other patterns alien to the colloquial language. No rules can of course be given for *how* one should translate a text, but it is perhaps worth reflecting on *what* a translation should render. The present writer has always preferred a rather technical translation that tries to render both phraseology and diction of

Western Tamang ritual texts and to respect their specific structural or poetic qualities which are in a sense part of the meaning, namely means of evoking associations, providing cross-references between contexts and imposing formal "solutions" on what is conceptually irresolvable, etc. This procedure necessitates some compromise with the stylistic taste of the target language, but has, on the other hand, the advantage of facilitating the orientation for the reader who is not familiar with the source language. Different texts may require different approaches with regard to formulation and style, but the translation should principally render what the text means, here and now, to the informants themselves, while the etymological meaning and the ethnographer's own exegesis are to be dealt with in the comments only. As far as practically possible, (10) one should not confound these three levels of interpretation arbitrarily and, say, fill a gap in the informants' interpretation by a meaning won by way of etymology in the translation itself.

To conclude, these proposals are not meant to suggest that the anthropologist be also linguist, philologist, folklorist, literary theorist, musicologist, psychologist and cameraman in one, but that he should learn from these specialists and even collaborate with them, occasionally at least. In any case, he is advised to give more consideration to the ritual texts being multi-medial events that take place in the interactional triangle between performer, direct beneficiary and general audience. Only if we know more about the very "functioning" of the texts performed, will we be able to know more about their *raison d'être*: about what oral tradition *is*. More than twenty years after the

inception of the "ethnography of speaking", it is now perhaps time to develop an "ethnography of reciting".

We must not be blinded by the mythologem of the "lost writing/lost book" so widespread among the peoples whose texts we record, and take it as an acknowledgement of a basic communicative "insufficiency" inherent in all what is oral. (11) Rather, we have to explore what these traditions themselves cite in support of their orality. We should listen to the Western Tamang shaman who, according to his texts, wants to heal by "music and dance" also, and try to understand why an important god in Maharashtra categorically refuses to be "fettered" by writing in a book and prefers, instead, to be celebrated in nightlong songs by illiterate herdsmen (Sontheimer 1976: 198).

Notes:

- (1) For reason of space I refrain from discussing the theoretical issues implied in the proposals.
- (2) Griminger 1991: 402.
- (3) As Maskarinec (1990: 220) remarks with reference to the "rulings" of the *jhākri*: "(...) I have come to realize that a thorough explanation of context is even more critical than are extensive glosses if these texts are to be understood and interpreted (...)"
- (4) Antonin Artaud called "spatial language" those specific articulatory and gestural means in theatre, through which the verbal becomes concretized, the signified (otherwise likely to be supplanted by the purely verbal medium) gains in autonomy and is more readily grasped (Todorov 1971: 213ff.).
- (5) Holmberg (1989: 142ff.) is right in calling "shamanic soundings" the Tamang *jhākri*'s rituals. - Maskarinec (1990: 160) brief description of how the

jhākri articulates a mantra is a rather rare example in the literature under consideration here.

(6) One of the more or less reliable test methods to distinguish the unstaged from the staged is to follow the old-established rule requiring from the ethnographer that he identify all persons present (whether active or passive participant, performer or helper, beneficiary [patient, client], sponsor, kinsman or onlooker, etc.) at the site of a ritual in order to determine their role and their relationship to each other.

(7) I adopt the term from Foley (1990: 373-374, 377, 386-387). He sees the "generic override" at work in a faulty choice between alternatives that are equivalent in terms of story pattern, but not in terms of actual narrative content; such errors are the result of story-pattern congruence and the Serbo-Croatian bard's traditional impulse towards analogy.

(8) And since such spontaneous gatherings occur regularly, one is even led to ask if they are not to be considered an integral, albeit "profane", part of the death-feast.

(9) Perhaps with the exception of Tibetan dialects, the spelling of terms not attested in the dictionaries, in the literary or urban colloquial language can in most instances be easily established either on the basis of etymology or with the help of literate local informants.

(10) This distinction cannot be applied radically, of course, since the exegesis by the informants is already an exegesis for the ethnographer, and the very work of translating (the choice of adequate terms, style, punctuation, layout, etc.) is already an interpretation by the ethnographer.

(11) To me, the myth (also referred to by Gaenzle) acknowledges the superiority of writing not as a mode of communication but as a mode of cultural transmission by way of "fixing" and preserving only. And since in Indian and Tibetan cultures, the transmission itself cannot be authentic, nor even achieved at all, without the intervention of a guru of divine inspiration, the myth can ignore the danger that lies in the semantic autonomy a text is likely to assume once it is written (as contended by the neo-hermeneutic school). Moreover, these cultures treat the book as a repository of sacred words which become effective when the written is converted into oral performance by *reciting* - often in a group and/or before a public.

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