

Meetings and Professional Notes

Oral Tradition and Literacy Changing Visions of the World

Oral tradition is a peculiarly exciting field of study, overlapping as it does the usual boundaries between academic departments. The potential of the field for drawing together scholars from a wide variety of disciplines was very well demonstrated by a recent conference on "Oral Tradition and Literacy—Changing Visions of the World."

Organized under the patronage of the Medieval Society of Southern Africa as part of the 75th anniversary celebrations of the University of Natal, South Africa, our conference took place on the Durban campus of that university from July 22-25, 1985. The conference sought to throw light particularly on the problematic area where orality and literacy overlap and interreact. And to this end the conference brought together a large number of delegates from many different subject-areas—classical, medieval, and modern languages, African studies, anthropology, music, history, communications, and religious studies.

The conference organizers were extremely fortunate to secure as keynote speaker Professor Albert B. Lord of Harvard University. It was a privilege to have with us at the conference a scholar whose fieldwork and writings have been so fundamentally important to the growth of oral studies over the last half-century. Our other invited speakers were the distinguished Africanist, Dr. Elizabeth Gunner of the School of Oriental and African Studies, London; and Professor Jeff Opland, a scholar widely known in the field of Anglo-Saxon and Xhosa oral poetry, at present visiting professor in the Department of African Languages at the University of South Africa.

Besides some 25 papers the conference program also included two evenings of live performance. The first of these was an exciting performance by *Abafana Bomoya* ("The Boys of the Wind") of the music, song, and dance of Zulu migrant workers, combining traditional rural and new urban styles. The second evening turned out to be one of the highlights of the conference. Billed as "Nguni oral poetry performed and explained," the occasion put on display the talents, and very different styles, of three contemporary oral poets, two Zulu and one Xhosa. The first was a teenager, still learning his craft, who distributed a prepared text but then deviated from it in actual performance. The second was a retired school-teacher who once, some years ago, but never since, was moved to compose a poem in the oral traditional style on the contemporary political situation. He had often declaimed his poem at public meetings, with great success, and he now performed it for us. The third performer was the greatest living Xhosa praise-poet, David Manisi. Mr. Manisi gave an electrifying demonstration of oral poetic composition-in-performance which will not easily be forgotten by those who were there. When it was suggested from the floor that his poem had not,

perhaps, been entirely improvised, Mr. Manisi immediately delivered a new impromptu poem directed at the doubter! The performances were followed by questions and a panel discussion involving Dr. E. Gunner and Professors A. T. Cope, J. Opland, and Albert B. Lord. (An edited videotape of the evening is being prepared; inquiries should be directed to the authors of this article.)

The keynote address of the conference was delivered by *Professor Albert B. Lord* and bore the title *Words Heard and Words Seen*. His lucid and comprehensive paper drew together many themes that were to re-emerge later in the conference. Professor Lord insisted that although oral and written literature employ different methods of composition, the worlds they inhabit are not wholly separate. Both deal in words: "words heard, when set in the forms of art, are oral literature; words seen, when set in the forms of art, are written literature. When writing enters an oral tradition the forms of literature do not immediately change. An "oral residue" persists in the new written tradition, sometimes for many centuries. Professor Lord concluded by combating the "popular misconception that oral literature is crude, formless, unstructured, that without writing one cannot create intricate structures of verbal expression." He offered a number of examples of stylistic and artistic excellence in oral literature, drawn from South Slavic song and from the Finnish *Kalevala*.

The conference papers after the keynote address were grouped into the following sessions:

Early European Societies

First in this session *Professor R. Whitaker, University of Natal, Durban*, spoke on *Oral and Literary Elements in Homer's Epics*. Whitaker's paper surveyed the history of the idea of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as oral poems. He showed how, in the modern period, this idea first arose in the eighteenth century, remained dormant for much of the nineteenth century, and was then developed in the twentieth century in new ways and with far-reaching results by Milman Parry and Albert B. Lord. Subsequently much research has dealt with the problematic "gray" area between oral and literate. Whitaker concluded by arguing that controversy about the manner of composition of the Homeric epics should not lead us too far away from our primary task—appreciation of the epics as works of literature.

Professor W. J. Henderson, Rand Afrikaans University, spoke next on *Oral Elements in Solon's Poetry*. Henderson showed how Solon was a transitional figure in Athenian constitutional and literary history, making his contribution when Athens was emerging from the earlier tribal socio-political structures. Solon stood on the threshold between a predominantly oral and an increasingly literate society. He offered Athens a written code of laws, yet, significantly, he felt it necessary to use the medium of poetry to explain and justify his constitutional reforms. Against this background Henderson argued that Solon's poetry could not be classified either as purely "oral" or as purely "literate."

Moving on many centuries, the next paper was *Syntax and Rhythm in the Song of Roland: Evidence of a Changing Vision of the World?*, delivered by *Professor L. Peeters, University of Pretoria*. Peeters began by arguing that the difference between oral and written is not absolute; long before he inscribed words man used visual signs, paintings, to convey meaning. With regard to the *Song of Roland*, Peeters showed that the indissoluble unity between syntax and rhythm in the poem, and the fact that it was governed by laws of melody, proved beyond doubt that the poem was meant to be

performed. But the scholar's main task was not to decide whether the poem was "oral" or "literate," but to interpret its profound spiritual and symbolic meaning for its and our own time.

Dr. P. Buchholz, University of South Africa, read a paper entitled *Pagan Scandinavian 'Witchdoctors' and their God in Medieval Christian Perspective*. Buchholz discussed material from a culture and period (medieval Scandinavia) in which a predominantly oral tradition changed to a mode of expression strongly influenced by literacy and in which paganism lingered on into the Christian era. The figure of the pagan "magician" obviously required some editing or comment by a Christian author dealing with him in writing. Yet, Buchholz showed, because Scandinavian paganism and Christianity shared a religious belief in the supernatural, it required only relatively minor transformations to incorporate the pagan "witchdoctor" into a Christian world view.

In her conference paper *Mrs. A. E. Stewart Smith, University of Cape Town*, dealt with *Non-aristocratic Poetry: The World beyond Beowulf*, examining the charms, gnomes, and riddles of the Anglo-Saxon tradition. Stewart Smith argued that these could throw light on the life of the ordinary people of those times, a life lived in the shifting reality of a heroized past and a harsh present. These less aristocratic writings revealed the world huddled round the mead-hall in historical, sociological, and human detail. They were evidence of a flourishing and popular practice in vernacular literature inheriting from the oral tradition and expressing the interest of their present.

Taking us into a different genre, *Mr. M. P. Bezuidenhout, University of Port Elizabeth*, discussed *Oral Tradition in Medieval Church Songs, with Special Reference to Manuscript Grey 64 in the South African Library*. Bezuidenhout described this manuscript, a late thirteenth-century composite Office-book from central or southern Italy, containing a number of plainchant melodies in Beneventan notation. He showed that the music in the manuscript did not represent a literate tradition. Several features of the notation indicated that the melodies could not have been read without some knowledge of the plainchant repertory. Bezuidenhout concluded, therefore, that the manuscript could be regarded as a document to be used for the regulation of an oral tradition.

Mr. B. S. Lee, University of Cape Town, in his paper, *Margery Kempe: An Articulate Illiterate*, argued that the autobiography of this woman (c. 1373-1438), which was dictated to two writers, illustrated the transition from orality to literacy. Lee examined the modes of thinking associated with Kempe's illiteracy, and the ways her amanuenses coped with them. Lee attempted, first, to distinguish various contributions to her *Book*, then to trace her spiritual development from unreflecting illiteracy to a kind of semi-literate self-consciousness, and finally to identify signs of her illiteracy evident in the extant text.

Finally in this session *Professor E. Sienaert, University of Natal, Durban* (to whom the credit belongs for having conceived the conference and overseen its organization) gave a paper illustrated by slides, *Reading a Story Carved in Ivory: La Chastelaine de Vergi*. Sienaert described the complex iconographic language to be found in medieval illustrations of the Bible and also in secular representations carved in ivory. He then interpreted the iconography of a representation of the tragic thirteenth-century love-story, *La Chastelaine de Vergi*, on an ivory casket in the Louvre. Sienaert argued that the use of a generally known language of gestures by the artist would have given even illiterate viewers a ready grasp of this "literary" story.

Contemporary African Literature in European Languages

Our second session opened with a paper, *From "Griot" to Folk-tale: The Tales of Amadou Koumba by Birago Diop*, given by Mrs. J. Neethling, Rand Afrikaans University. Neethling's argument was that, although Diop purported merely to be transcribing into French stories and fables told him by Amadou, son of Koumba, Diop himself was a highly creative and original storyteller. His efforts to preserve part of a rich heritage of oral literature were successful due to his literary skill, ready wit, and talent for acute observation. Neethling observed that in his three volumes of stories he retained many of the rhetorical devices of his oral sources, thus creating an air of informal authenticity.

In her paper, *From the Spoken Word to the Book—A Study of the Oral Tradition in A. Kourouma's Novel, The Suns of Independence*, Dr. A. Wynchenk, University of Cape Town, first briefly outlined the history of writing in West Africa. She then discussed the influence on the novel of a culture with strong oral traditions, with particular reference to *The Suns of Independence*. Wynchenk contrasted this with the typical West African novel. She analyzed the role given to the usual ingredients of the oral tradition—genealogy, riddles, song, etc. Wynchenk finally discussed the allowances made by Kourouma for the modern mentality and the choice of interpretations he offered the novel's readers.

One of our visitors from the north, Dr. B. J. Soko, University of Malawi, then read a paper on *Translating Oral Literature into European Languages*. Soko stated that his fieldwork and study of oral literature had shown that much was left out when a text deriving from the oral tradition was translated from an African language into a European one. He discussed various possible solutions to this problem and also pointed out that where oral traditions had been written down, the oral performance had usually disappeared. Soko examined people's reaction to this situation.

Moving into the realm of children's literature, Professor E. R. Jenkins, Vista University, gave a paper entitled *Marguerite Poland and the Tradition of Anthropomorphism in Animal Stories*. Jenkins outlined the work of Poland, South Africa's leading writer in English for children, many of whose stories, deriving from African and San folktales, have talking animals as their chief characters. Jenkins argued that the literary antecedents of her stories included also the "art" versions of European talking-beast fables and the classic animal stories of English children's fiction of the last 150 years. He concluded that Poland's achievement lay in her evocation of South African flora and fauna and in the vision and originality of her beautifully told stories.

Recording Oral Tradition

Vicissitudes in the recording of oral traditions formed the subject of the third conference-session.

Professor D. M. Moore, University of Fort Hare, spoke on *Oral Testimony and a Community in Transition*. Moore dealt with some of the real problems the historian experiences when attempting to collect and evaluate oral testimony in a transitional society. His discussion centered on the effect of political, economic, and social aspects of change upon both the informant and the fieldworker, and ultimately upon their product—the testimony. Moore drew attention to the need to be aware of certain problems while engaged in the oral history of the Cape Eastern Frontier, and the need to preserve the dwindling store of "living history."

Dealing with the same geographical area, *Mr. C. J. de Wet, Rhodes University*, read a paper, *Perceptions of Village History (1854-1950)*. de Wet traced the way people in a rural Ciskei village perceived the history of their village from 1854, when it was established, through to 1950. Focusing on the history of the village headmanship, de Wet showed how this reflected the nature of the often uneasy relationship between the village and the authorities. de Wet made use of both oral and archival accounts and analyzed the contrasts between different oral accounts, and between the perceptions of the villagers, and of the authorities, of the history of the headmanship.

Father D. Dargie, Lumko Missiological Institute, Mount Frere, Transkei, looked at *Problems of Music Literacy: Gains and Losses, with Reference to Xhosa Music*. Dargie argued that, although there could be no doubt of the great value of music literacy, nevertheless it seemed that even in Europe the system that had developed was not adequate to represent medieval music. For African music the method of staff notation as used in Western music was not able to cope with all that should be transcribed; and the sol-fa method was totally inadequate. He concluded that in using this method in Xhosa music we took away far more than we gave. (Dargie illustrated his talk with recordings and spirited performances on various Xhosa instruments.)

Lastly in this session, *Dr. R. Belcher, University of Natal, Durban*, gave a paper entitled *From Literature to Orality and Back: The Griqua Case-history*. Belcher outlined the history of the Griqua oral tradition, going back to their first leader, Adam Kok I, in the early eighteenth century. He pointed out that religious hymns entered Griqua tradition from printed hymnals but were then handed down orally. Griqua secular tradition, however, consisting of historical accounts and topical poetry, was from the start wholly oral. Belcher showed how a movement from orality to the use of writing started in the early twentieth century with Chief le Fleur I, who focussed the Grikwas' national sentiments through his historical writings. This movement has since grown in strength.

Oral Tradition and Education

Here our first speaker was *Professor G. J. Hutchings, University of the Transkei*, with his paper, *Home-made Furniture: The Oral Tradition in English and Academic Attitudes*. Hutchings deplored the neglect of oral literature by English departments in South African universities. He argued that this distorted the nature of English literature, as critics were cut off from the sources of writers' inspiration; there was a warning here for students of African literature. Hutchings then considered possible approaches to oral literature in English in relation to two topics, Elizabethan lyric and the critical problem of "realism" in the novel, with particular reference to *Wuthering Heights*.

Our second Malawian visitor, *Dr. F. Moto, University of Malawi*, spoke next on the topic, *From Oral Tradition to the Written Word: The Malawian Experience*. Moto's argument was that communication between policy-makers and the majority of their people was crucial to the progress of any nation. To this end literacy programs were seen as essential. But people acquiring information from verbal or visual messages had to attach meaning to symbols with which they were not familiar, and this was no easy task. Moto highlighted in his paper the likely perception of himself and his world.

Returning to the area of the Eastern Cape, *Mr. P. A. McAllister, Rhodes University*, dealt with *Conservatism as Ideology of Resistance among Xhosa-speakers: The Implication for Oral Tradition and Literacy*. His paper

presented traditional Xhosa conservatism as an attempt to maintain a particular vision of the world. This had to be understood in the context of the conditions under which Xhosa-speakers had been incorporated into the South African political economy. McAllister argued that oral tradition, especially formal oratory, was one of the ways in which the conservative world-view was created and maintained; this ideology had certain implications for attitudes towards literacy and education.

African Societies: Literature

One of our invited speakers, *Professor J. Opland, Visiting Professor, University of South Africa*, opened this session with his paper, *The Transition from Oral to Written in Xhosa Literature*. Opland showed how Xhosa oral forms were exploited in early publications by Christian missionaries for didactic purposes, while later missionary editors rejected appeals to use their publications for the preservation of oral tradition. He outlined the way in which published books followed the imperatives of western genres, often in response to the dictates of school syllabi. But the independent black newspapers—popular, ephemeral, but designed for an adult readership, unlike the books—gave evidence of a fascinating interplay between oral and written modes, a truer “transition” than published books reflected.

From Xhosa we moved to Zulu literature, with a paper by *Professor A. T. Cope, University of Natal*, entitled *Literacy and the Oral Tradition: The Zulu Evidence*. Cope argued that the Zulu evidence could not contribute much to the thesis that a people’s “vision of the world” changed with the transition from orality to literacy, and he stated his reservations about this general claim. Cope then considered the relationship between modern Zulu written poetry and the oral tradition, taking in turn the poets B. W. Vilakazi and J. C. Dlamini who, though aware of it, could not write in the heroic style, and C. T. Msimang who wrote successful praise-poems. He also gave an example of a praise-poem “literally” or “papyrally” prepared in advance for oral presentation.

The third and final paper in this session, *Colonial Conquest and Popular Response in N. Cameroun (1896-1907); How Literature Becomes Oral Literature*, was delivered by *Dr. V. Erlmann, University of Natal*. Erlmann examined a genre of oral literature in the Fulbe society of Jam’aare, called *mbooku*. Originating in 1890, *mbooku* poems related historical events that occurred in the Lake Chad region between 1881 and 1907. He showed how *mbooku* emerged in response to the decline of traditional Islamic society and to European colonial conquest, and how the texts combined structural elements of traditional Fulbe performance with the imagery and conservative ideology of classical Arab eschatological literate poetry.

African Societies: Religion

The final session of the conference was opened by our third invited speaker, *Dr. E. Gunner, School of Oriental and African Studies, London*, with a paper on *The Word, the Book and the Zulu Church of Nazareth*. Gunner began by questioning the evolutionist approach to oral poetry implicit in the work of a scholar such as Bowra, and also the oral-literate dichotomy set forth in the work of Walter Ong. She demonstrated the reliance on both the spoken and sung oral tradition and on the printed word, with regard to the traditions and practice of the AmaNazareth Church founded by Isaiah Shembe. Gunner’s paper argued the case for the interrelation of the oral and literate modes rather than linear progression.

Lastly, *Dr. J. Hodgson, University of Cape Town*, gave a paper entitled *Fluid Assets and Fixed Investments: 160 Years of the Ntsikana Tradition*. Hodgson's thesis was that if a symbol was to have maximum authority it must meet deep needs in the contemporary situation, while the vitality of the tradition from which it was taken had to be maintained. Her paper showed how the writing down of the story of Ntsikana (c. 1780-1821), who was associated with the beginnings of Christianity among the Xhosa-speaking people, became a fixed investment perpetuating the living tradition, while the oral sources were fluid assets used in each generation to add prestige to Ntsikana's role as historic prophetic figure.

What conclusions emerged from the conference papers and the discussions that followed them? Most important, perhaps, a renewed sense of just how complex the field of oral studies is. It became clear to us as we considered the problem that cultures do not change from orality to literacy in any simple obvious way. In fact, many delegates doubted whether a complete changeover does ever occur; they argued rather that, even after the introduction of literacy, orality persists alongside and interacts with the new mode. The extent to which literacy may oust orality will vary a great deal from culture to culture and from period to period; and even within a single culture the oral mode may continue to be preferred in some genres or activities while being displaced by literacy in others.

A further important point to emerge from our discussions was that, even where the "vision of the world" of a predominantly oral traditional culture does change significantly, the coming of literacy may be only one among many factors contributing to the change. The advent of literacy may be bound up with the introduction of a new religion—as was the case in medieval Europe and in colonial Africa—and with processes of industrialization, urbanization, and with alterations in political and social institutions. In sum, the orality-literacy shift is a historical phenomenon, and we need to examine it against the background of the society and the period in which it occurs before we can attempt to make significant generalizations.

The great success of the conference has led to plans for another similar conference two to three years hence. Further, the Durban-based organizing committee is now involved in the setting up of a regular "Seminar for Oral Studies" at the University of Natal. The Seminar will meet several times a year to hear and discuss papers given by members of many different academic departments on the whole range of oral studies.

Finally, plans are well underway to publish the proceedings of the July 1985 conference as a book. We shall keep readers of this journal informed of future developments.

University of Natal
Durban

Richard Whitaker
Edgard Sienaert



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An announcement of interest to readers of *Oral Tradition*:

1987

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES
SUMMER SEMINARS FOR COLLEGE TEACHERS

“THE ORAL TRADITION IN LITERATURE”

Director: John Miles Foley

Over the last several decades, scholars have begun to appreciate the enormous significance of the oral traditions that lie behind some of our most important works of literature. Furthermore, since the publication of Albert Lord's *The Singer of Tales*, it has become apparent that works with roots in oral tradition demand interpretation on their own terms. This seminar will have as its fundamental goal the formulation of a poetics that will facilitate the understanding of oral traditional works *sui generis*. By considering both primary oral texts (Yugoslav, Native American, and African epics and other genres) and works with roots in oral tradition (the Bible, the Homeric epics, *Beowulf*, *The Song of Roland*, and *The Poem of the Cid*), participants in this seminar will explore theories of creation and transmission, oral performance, and the implications of structure for meaning from a comparative perspective.

College teachers are encouraged to apply for this NEH Summer Seminar, to be held at the University of Missouri/Columbia from June 15 to August 7. The twelve applicants selected will be awarded stipends of \$3500 to defray travel and housing expenses. For further information, please write to John Foley, Center for Studies in Oral Tradition, Department of English, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO 65211.