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Tradition, But What Tradition and For Whom?

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The Milman Parry Lecture on Oral Tradition for 1989-90

It is an honor and pleasure to be invited to give the 1989-90 Parry Lecture. In trying to analyze the concept of "tradition" and how it is used I hope that—as I will go on to elaborate further later—I have chosen a subject in keeping with the insights and approaches that we owe to Milman Parry. I intend to introduce the questions in my title[1] by some comment on the word "tradition" itself. This term and its adjective "traditional" have long been central concepts in my own discipline of anthropology, are constantly used to differentiate and classify phenomena, and, of course, are basic both to the title of this journal and to the Center for Studies in Oral Tradition that sponsors it. And yet "tradition" is also a concept that raises many puzzles. My plan, therefore, is to discuss some of the problems and assumptions behind the uses of "tradition" and "traditional" and their importance for scholarship, then go on to comment on some new moves in a number of disciplines—in particular anthropology, folklore, and oral history—that are now jointly making us reassess these once-basic terms. After that I will be returning again to Milman Parry.

Some Meanings and Uses of the Term "Tradition"

"Tradition" is a commonly used word—and, like many common words, elusive. Precisely because it is usually taken for granted as basic and so—in a sense—"obvious," it has often for that reason not been discussed. It is instructive to look at the word in the standard reference works and dictionaries and find how often it is missing (missing, that is, in the sense of having an entry of its own—it does of course appear within

[1] Loyal readers of *Oral Tradition* will realize that my title deliberately parallels that of Henige's recent discussion (1988).

discussions of other terms). One looks in vain between "trading stamp" and "Trafalgar" in the Micropaedia of the current (1974) edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, for example, or between "trade winds" and "Traducianism" in *Chambers Encyclopedia* (1973). Similarly, there are no entries in *Colliers Encyclopedia*, the standard and still authoritative *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (1968), or the recent *International Encyclopedia of Communications* (Barnouw 1989).[2] There are *some* entries to be found, however. The *New English Dictionary* (the "Oxford English Dictionary") has a predictably full and helpful entry, and the term is also well discussed in the 1964 *Dictionary of the Social Sciences* (Gould and Kolb 1964) and, with characteristic vigor, in Raymond Williams's *Keywords* (1983). In the supposedly superseded (but still pertinent) *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* (Seligman 1935), Max Radin concludes a critical discussion with the very modern-sounding comment (67):

> In all its aspects it [tradition] retains enough of its primary characteristics of vagueness, remoteness of source, and wide ramification to make it seem peculiarly strong to those who have recourse to it and peculiarly weak to those who mean to reject it.

These and other dictionary entries reveal clearly that here is a term that is both value-laden and of varied application. The often-used and relatively neutral general meaning of "tradition" as a general *process* of handing down, particularly by word of mouth, is almost always noted. But there are also the contrasting, more concrete senses in which "tradition" refers to the *content* of what is thus handed down, either this content generally (sometimes vaguely defined as "custom" or anything that is "old") or, significantly, just *some* selection from this content (selected, naturally, according to current assumptions about the value—or sometimes disvalue—of what is selectively thus labeled tradition" or "traditional"). There are also more specific meanings of "tradition" that spill over into the general flavor of the term: the unwritten codes or body of teachings in certain world religions, for example, or one of the "ideal type" sources of authority in Max Weber's typology (where it is opposed to that of "rational" and of "charismatic" authority).

Amid this variety, three main points emerge particularly forcefully from the various dictionary entries and usages: 1) "Tradition" has a number of *different* meanings, in particular referring both to process and to product, and with broader and narrower applications; 2) although sometimes on the face of it neutral, the term is apparently also used (and

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[2] There is, however, an excellent discussion of the concept in Barnouw 1989 in the "Folklore" entry by Richard Bauman.

manipulated?) in an emotive sense, not seldom linked with deeply felt and powerful academic, moral, or political values; and 3) despite the differences, there *are* recurrent themes, even though the precise definition or identification of these features—and hence of what is to be counted as "tradition"—may not be thoroughly agreed upon. These are the ideas of a) unwritten or oral transmission (but what exactly *this* implies is, likewise, not always agreed upon); b) something handed down and *old* (but how old and in what sense varies); and c) *valued*—or occasionally disvalued—beliefs and practices (but whose values count and why seems to vary).

It is of course easy enough to take almost any important term and show that it has several meanings and is not used consistently. But my intention in this quick introductory summary is not to demolish the term, but the more positive purpose of indicating that there are problems with it that are well worth looking at explicitly. Here we have a concept, in other words, that has more complexity to it than is normally realized when it is encountered as an apparently limpid defining property. Indeed, the reason I think the points above are worth noting is that these characteristics of a word—especially the wider and narrower applications, the varied meanings, and, above all, the implicit evaluative connotations—are precisely those that signal terms that need to be unwrapped with special care, caution that has not always been shown in the scholarly usage of the term "tradition" in the past. The recurrent features and applications of the word "tradition" (and "traditional"), therefore, should alert us not only to its importance for the kinds of topics which have interested many scholars both in the past and in the present, but also that its applicability is a complex, loaded, and not fully agreed-upon matter—and thus the more worth discussion.

The first point to strike one in any examination of the usage of "tradition" and "traditional" is how basic the terms have been to several scholarly disciplines and how this centrality has linked with wider values both in these disciplines and in the cultural and political processes of which they formed part. This is so particularly (though not exclusively) in the disciplines of anthropology, folklore, and (in a rather different way) sociology, where the concepts of "tradition" and "traditional" have been central to the subjects, almost part of their definition.

Let me elaborate a little. For although this is not the place for a history of these disciplines (nor do I have space for a lengthy consideration of this complex subject), some brief comments can put the later discussion in some perspective. Anthropology began by being defined as the study of "primitive" societies. The original background to this perspective was the common nineteenth-century metaphor of a one-way evolutionary ladder on which all societies could be placed, the industrial European cultures being

obviously at the top (and in particular, of course, that of Victorian England), non-European and colonial peoples at or near the bottom. The latter were envisaged as still at the "early"—primitive—stages from which the developed and now *non*traditional nations had started but had by now left behind (although "survivals" of these older stages could sometimes be detected).

The pictures of these "earlier" cultures being more "traditional" in the sense of having remained at a more primitive and less advanced stage also linked with influential social theories being developed in the nineteenth century as one way of making sense of—and finding a new identity within—what were perceived as the vast developments currently taking place in society in the Industrial Revolution. These theories took many and varied forms, but one emerging thread within them was the distinctions they commonly drew between "us" (the industrialized, the Victorians) and "them" (the non-European and colonized, far away both historically and geographically). It was the latter that constituted the subject matter of anthropology, and the effect of the influence of such "classic" social theorists as Weber, Durkheim, Marx, and Tönnies (still powerful figures in social science) was to imply a binary divide between two basically different types of society: the one non-industrial and characteristically marked by *Gemeinschaft*, religion, emphasis on unchanging tradition from the far past, collective norms, face-to-face and oral communication, lack of change, and closeness to nature; the other typified by *Gesellschaft*, rationality, literacy, individuality, change, and the artificial contractual relationships viewed as typical of urban living within Western industrial civilization. The first "type" was—and is—often broadly and short-handedly dubbed "traditional" and the fit subject for anthropology; the second "modern" and to be studied by sociologists.

Although the *necessary* coincidence of these various factors or even their precise incidence had not been empirically or systematically demonstrated, these oppositional contrasts appeared to have the force of incontrovertible truth. Thus it could be commonly assumed without question that any society that could be called "traditional" in any one of these senses must also be "traditional" in the others too, that literacy *always* goes with individuality or change, for example, while oral forms of communications never do, or that if something can be termed "tradition" in one sense—an established custom, say, or formulated orally rather than in writing—it must always attach the other properties of being old ("from time immemorial" is the favorite phrase here), unsuited to modern urban and industrial living, and necessarily resistant to change.

This then formed the background to the initial development of anthropology as a discipline, closely associated with "traditional" culture and all the characteristics that were supposed to go along with this

abstraction. It is true that within the social sciences this binary view of human culture is now under challenge, with both new moves in social theory and our own changing social and political experiences in the latter part of the twentieth century. But outside social science it still often holds sway (indeed sometimes within it too, owing to the still revered "classical" status of nineteenth-century social theorists) and certainly formed one dominating thread in the comparative interpretation of the nature of cultures and their manifestations in a world frame. As such it provided an apparent rationale for the distinctiveness of anthropology as the discipline that studied "primitive" or "traditional" society, the two terms being taken as synonymous.[3]

It is doubtless no accident that both the development of anthropology and the particular associations among "tradition," backwardness, and lack of change coincided with the particular historical experiences of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the expansion of Western commerce and education, and the imperial experience as a whole. It made sense—and, it has been argued, was not inconsistent with the interests of the dominant powers—to regard colonized areas such as Africa as essentially "old" and unchanging, marked by immemorial and natural "tradition" rather than "history"—places to which the West could bring change, literacy, and enlightenment. Anthropology's task was to document the "traditional" forms, so that even when changes were taking place, anthropologists—it was assumed—needed to look to the "original" and authentically "traditional" aspect. So it was naturally those, rather than the more urban, contentious, or obviously changing elements, that long formed the subject of anthropological fieldwork; anthropological reports concentrated on the "traditional" kinship practices, "traditional" religion, the "traditional" political system, and so on. This was also an appropriate focus during the British colonial policy of Indirect Rule through local "traditional" authorities. The anthropologists could, among other things, help to identify and interpret who these were—indeed in some cases, it may be that they cooperated unconsciously with the rulers and/or local pressure groups in defining or reinforcing particular positions of power as "traditional" authorities. All in all, for many years the subject of anthropology and the context in which it operated highlighted the concept of "tradition" (and "traditional") as central to the kind of phenomena and culture which it described, a concept that was in earlier years most often assumed to be clear and accepted enough to demand little critical discussion.

Folklore is another discipline that in the past has largely been defined

[3] It is, incidentally, because I reject the validity of this supposed binary divide between societies that I also question the old separation between anthropology and sociology built on it.

in terms of studying "tradition" and the "traditional" (it is sometimes also associated with the related concept of unwritten transmission). Although folklore tends to differ from anthropology in concentrating mainly on Western rather than "aboriginal" peoples, it too started from evolutionist models, and for a long while looked mainly to "survivals" and "relics" left over from the earlier strata of the far-distant past. Most modern professional folklorists have moved away from the simple unilinear model of progress, but even so the concept of "tradition" and of being "old" remained—and to some extent still remains—central to most self- definitions of the subject.[4]

The concept of folklore, and with it of tradition, also played a significant role in nationalistic movements. Herder's Romantic philosophy of the *Volk* and the idea of a folk tradition existing deep in the soil and the souls of the people were taken up as the basis for asserting their own pride and national identity distinct from those other nations or cultures by whom, previously, they had been dominated. This phenomenon forms the background to many of the great collecting efforts in, for example, Finland in the nineteenth century, Ireland in the early twentieth, or some ex-colonial countries more recently. In such nations in particular (though not only there) one of the contributions to creating their own national identity was the discovery—or, it may be, the formulation and reconstruction—of their "traditional" epics, songs, or narratives (see, for example, Wilson 1976, Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983:13f., and Honko 1988).

So if we look at these earlier usages and experiences of the concept of tradition and ask "what tradition?" and "tradition for whom?" at least one set of answers directs us to its *usefulness* for certain historically specific purposes. Notions about the nature and applicability of tradition were used to define and differentiate academic subjects; interpreted in a certain way the concept located "us" and "our" experience in the wider context of world history; it encapsulated a rationale and a set of ideals that could be associated with Western imperial, commercial, and business expansion in other countries of the world and were apparently supported by anthropological findings about the traditional institutions in those countries; and it provided a vision and a sense of confidence for the newly integrating nations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, first in Europe, then in Africa, Asia, and the Pacific.

It is scarcely surprising that this emotive concept—that is, the

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[4] See for example the 21 definitions of "folklore" in *Funk and Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore* (Leach 1972), which first appeared in 1949 but was recently reprinted and is still consulted as an authoritative reference work. Amid the many different viewpoints, it has been pointed out, the single most prominent theme is that of "tradition" (Utley 1961). See also Bauman's comments (1989a) on the centrality of tradition in folklore.

complex set of ideas clustering under this umbrella term—should be related to its times, deployed to serve cultural, intellectual, and political purposes. But the point is worth noting, if only because it gives more critical perspective on the term, reminding us to pay attention to its contexts of use and to those who used it, rather than just taking it at face value as a neutral and self-standing concept.

Recent Developments in the Study of Tradition

Against this background it is interesting to examine the more recent attitudes to the concept in a number of academic disciplines, for the emphases and scope of anthropology, folklore, and, indeed, the social sciences more generally are changing—as the world is too. In this section I want to comment briefly on some of these changes and their relevance for the associated developments in the analysis of the nature and working of "tradition."

As in any intellectual endeavor, there are different strands and a mixture of concurrent approaches. But it is probably fair to say that one powerfully developing trend across a wide range of social science disciplines is to question the older concept of "tradition" as unquestionably central to certain cultures or situations, and take a more critical and investigative approach not only to the processes underlying what are labelled "traditional" but also to the whole concept of "tradition" and how to study it. And if one aspect of the concept is its connotations of *value*, then it is becoming accepted that studying it also entails raising questions about *whose* values are being singled out, and for what purposes.

To set this in context it is worth commenting briefly on some recent developments within anthropology and folklore—those disciplines, in other words, that in the past were assumed to be the special caretakers of the study of tradition. Here it has become increasingly acceptable to study *new* and changing institutions rather than just those that could be deemed "old," to consider urban as well as rural environments (there is now, for example, the emerging branch of study known as "urban folklore"), and to include the interaction between oral and written forms as potentially equally as interesting as these separate modes of human communication once believed to be "pure" and "authentic." This expanding scope is in part because there has been little choice if the disciplines are to continue. In the modern world the spread of urbanism, industrialism, and literacy has become so visible within a global cultural context that it is now an even less practical proposition than before to insist on seeking only the far-off and "traditional" forms or to ignore "change" as abnormal anywhere but in the West. It is therefore now increasingly the practice to accept that cultures

are indeed changing and to turn to applying already established methods—in particular those relying on face-to-face investigation through fieldwork—to the study of contemporary situations, including in this effort both the modification and development of older traditions and the rise of new ones. As well as responding to a changing world, these same disciplines have also been developing newer theoretical approaches to the concept of "tradition" and its study. These take a number of forms that are particularly relevant to our discussion here.

First, there is now more interest in questions of artistry and individual expression than before when the stereotypes of "communal" culture and lack of change within cultures or contexts defined as "traditional" often precluded the apparent relevance of such questions. So instead of "tradition" or "traditional" as the common description of, say, local African or Pacific songs or stories, we now more often hear about their individual creators or audiences. And when the term "tradition" is used it is more often in the sense of the established conventions of a particular genre—whose usage then needs to be described—than of the earlier generalized and passive sense of tradition (with a capital "T" as it were, apparently needing no further elucidation). "Tradition" in *this* context is now applied to both oral and written forms, and to new and older genres, the emphasis often being on the way creators and performers exploit the constraints and opportunities of the genre, perhaps in innovative or individual ways. The similar emphasis on performance also fits with this trend (see, for example, Bauman 1989a,b,c). Since *how* something is performed is often now seen as part of what makes it a work of art, delivery skills and their handling by performers and audiences become a matter for study, most appropriately by field observation supported by tape recorders rather than merely by paper and pencil transcription. "Tradition" is increasingly seen as manifested—and thus demanding study—in aesthetically marked performances by individuals rather than as made up just of verbal content that could be handed down through the ages or fully captured in a written text.

A second developing interest is in oral-written interactions and the processes of change generally. "Mixed" situations and genres are now starting to be regarded as worthy of study in their own right, accepted as no less "natural" and "authentic" than the supposedly "pure" cultures or genres sought for in earlier approaches. It is no longer assumed that something "oral" must always exist in an insulated, separate, and older "traditional" world differentiated from "modern" industrial and literate situations, or that any interaction between them is strange or inappropriate as out of keeping with the West-centered unilinear direction of development. Change and interaction can now, for *all* cultures, be taken as normal rather than (in the case of the overseas ones) as unusual or strained.

The *study* of changing traditions is correspondingly now becoming more and more acceptable. For although the concept of "tradition" is still associated with the idea of something old and established, it is no longer taken for granted that this necessarily implies old in the sense of several centuries, far less "time immemorial." Indeed, the questions now followed up when something is classified as "tradition" or "traditional" are often those like "*how* old?" or "old in what sense?" or "in whose eyes?" And scholars now increasingly think of it as an open—and interesting—question *what* age something needs to be, and in what circumstances, before it can rightly be spoken of as a tradition.[5] Some reputed "traditions" turn out to have been established quite recently—remember the rapidity with which new fashions often spread!—with their relative youth not infrequently forgotten by the participants. In this sense the *age* of "tradition" has now become accepted as a relative rather than an absolute matter (something worth investigating rather than just taking for granted). Furthermore, since traditions do not spring up fully fledged or remain the same forever, the specific changes in traditions throughout their history as well as at any one point of time are now taken to be proper matters for empirical research.

A tradition, furthermore, has to be *used* by people for it to continue to exist. And whether in artistic, personal, or political contexts, this actual *usage* may be as liable to exploit, to modify, or to play with tradition as to follow it blindly. Traditions, it has become clear, are constantly open to change—indeed "Tradition is change" is one recent uncompromising summary (Honko and Laaksonen 1983:236)—and, correspondingly, are open to interpretation, development, and, on occasion, manipulation by those who follow or control them. In all these aspects their changes and developments are now recognized as fit objects of study, so that the blanket category of "tradition" or "traditional" can no longer be assumed to be a clear-cut mark of differentiation or definition without a further qualification making evident which particular aspects or which specific historical situation is being referred to.

These more recent approaches to the study of tradition do not apply only to newly undertaken research; there has also been critical reassessment of earlier studies. Because older ideas of the divide between the "traditional," collective, and communal on the one hand, and the modern, individual, and rational on the other are now challenged, conclusions based on this model are now up for questioning. Thus we have to look again at those older reports that conveyed the message of "traditional" cultures as all being essentially the same or as equally characterized by the age-old

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[5] For some general discussion see Shils 1981, Williams 1983, and Henige 1982:2-3. Dundes takes the rather different line that establishing a tradition is less a matter of time than of its establishment and circulation in multivariate forms (1984:158).

transmission of "traditional mores" and lack of change, the "Africa has no history" syndrome. Now that the historians have gotten seriously to work, it has become clear both that such conclusions were based on highly selective reporting (if not sheer ignorance) and that there is in fact plenty of scope for research not into generalities about "traditional" societies and their "tribal traditions," but into specific cultural developments and changes.

Similarly, the apparent "evidence" from older research that "traditional" stories or poetry from, say, Africa were produced collectively, had no individual authors, dated back to the long-ago tribal past, and were thus radically distinct from more recent compositions is now regarded with caution, perhaps due as much to the collectors' stereotypes as to hard evidence, their arguments being circular rather than empirical. The texts we have were, after all, transcribed and represented by individual researchers and/or their trained assistants and "native informants," participants in the research process perhaps all influenced by current models of what to expect and present. And since, as is now well established in recent scholarship, no written text based on oral delivery is a limpid and one-to-one representation of the original performance, some conscious or unconscious editing—some constructing—by these compilers, recorders, and transcribers must always lie behind the transcriptions that have been made available to us.[6]

This means that when a tale or poem or custom is said in the sources to be "traditional," we can no longer feel confident that we know what is meant by that term or—even if the researcher gives some fuller explanation—that we can accept the statement at its face value. In other words, the term "tradition" and "traditional" in scholarly accounts almost always needs deconstructing through such questions as: "traditional" in what sense? is it necessarily old? or collectively composed? or passed on passively without individual manipulation? *who* created it in whole or in part? how has its editing and interpretation affected the evidence, and with what assumptions or for what purpose? The upshot of considering such questions seems to be that all traditions are likely to be in one way or another constructed or exploited by individuals and interested parties (although not always with conscious deliberation). The study of these processes is thus of interest as one significant but unsurprising element in human culture.

A parallel approach is to be found in the influential *The Invention of*

[6] See the extensive discussion on the construction of texts in Fine 1984. This point is currently taken very seriously by most professional folklorists and others. As Barbara Herrnstein Smith points out (1981), it applies even to the innocuous-seeming plot summaries that appear in type- and motif-indexes. For further examples and discussion of this process in Pacific oral tradition, see Finnegan 1988: ch. 6.

Tradition, edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (1983), in which they include argued accounts of how "traditions" popularly taken to date back for centuries as a "natural" fact of life were in a sense "invented" in quite recent years: the Scottish Highland tradition, British royal rituals, "tribes" and "traditional chiefs" in Africa, and much of the "folklore" of the European nationalist movements. It is too simple to dismiss these traditions as "faked"—for they exist and are (often) valued. But this lends yet further support to the same general argument that if something is classifiable as "tradition" the scholar's role is to analyze and study the specifics of the practices and ideas and changes associated with that tradition—and of why it has been so classified and by whom—rather than just accepting it at face value. Since all traditions are in one sense constructed by human beings, the *processes* of their formation and manifestation—rather than just the traditions as given *products*—become an appropriate and interesting subject of study.[7]

This emerging emphasis in the study of tradition has been further reinforced by the current tendency in social science and history to take a rather cynical approach to questions of power and self-interest. A recurrent question is now often "to whose benefit?"—a question that, it is now recognized, can equally well be applied to the subject of tradition. At the least, there is now much greater awareness that behind the development and continuance of any tradition, there are likely to be specific political processes and interest groups. Traditions, so goes the more recent view, are not inevitably held in common to the equal good of all, but are equally likely to be manipulated and controlled for the benefit of certain groups—or, at the least, to reflect (perhaps unconsciously) the interests of those in power. Further, particular traditions may be seen differently by different groups within a society (another reason for questioning the older unified concept of "tradition") or be the subject of disputes between contending interests. "Tradition," in other words, is *used* for a whole series of disparate purposes (to cover up and so conceal change or disagreement perhaps as often as to reflect consensus or stability). Thus, in a way very different from earlier views of tradition as a separate and insulated independent entity, tradition is intimately bound up with the normal social and political processes of any society—indeed is part of them—and must be studied within the same framework. And if so it makes very good sense to at least *ask* of every claim for the "traditional" nature of something: "traditional in what sense?" and "used for what and for whose benefit?"

These reassessments of "tradition" and its study have, in my view, been to the good. Scholars have been moving away from "great divide" contrasts and evolutionist models, as well as from West-centered

[7] For some further examples or analysis of this process see, for example, Finnegan 1988: ch. 6, Cohen 1989, and Gailey 1989.

preconceptions that imposed a uniform category of "traditional" on those people deemed as yet outside the Western status, and replacing these older approaches with a more differentiated interest in specificities, in changes, and in traditions seen in their historical and political contexts. It is true that these are *tendencies* rather than single unified theories, and they have not necessarily been fully accepted by all scholars (this indeed is perhaps from another viewpoint just as well, since what any field surely needs is a diversity of theories rather than one single agreed-upon approach), but in general terms these trends now seem to be well to the fore in the contemporary study of tradition.

There are costs as well as the obvious benefits, however, in these recent tendencies, some of them painful ones. One is that terms that once seemed to provide a clear classification for particular cultures or phenomena ("tradition," "traditional") now elude us or at least need more investigation than was once assumed—if indeed they refer to anything very clear and differentiated at all. Instead of the earlier certainties we may have to settle for curiosity, continuing investigation, and, sometimes, an awareness of ignorance. Second, the once-accepted academic divisions of labor have become unsettled. Since one function of the older concepts of tradition and traditional was to define disciplinary boundaries for academics and administrators, the newer approaches thus mean that previous distinctions become uncomfortable. There is no quick solution to this problem, but in practice what has often happened is a continuation of older academic affiliations under the same labels (a good example of the continuance of tradition on the surface, masking the changes underneath?). But at the same time there is a much greater preparedness to be critical of the concept and uses of these terms despite their older centrality,[8] going along with a general enlarging of scope, some hesitation about the older disciplinary divisions, and an increasing emphasis on interdisciplinary perspectives.

. . .And in Oral-Formulaic Studies

My focus so far has been on recent developments in the study of tradition within anthropology, folklore, history, and the social sciences generally. But let me now come to the further interesting point, which will by now have become obvious to readers acquainted with recent work in oral-formulaic studies, that most of these very same developments can be found there too. Once again, not all scholars take the same approach, but

[8] See for example Dan Ben-Amos's recent analysis (1984) of the seven different senses of "tradition" used in folklore.

the changes have been marked enough among some leaders in the field to be counted as a definite tendency in the present and a trend to watch for in the future. In these developments this journal of *Oral Tradition* and its editor John Miles Foley have been particularly prominent. So too, if not all in exactly the same directions, have been—among others—Alain Renoir, Jeff Opland, and Albert Lord himself.[9] Thus there are many trends within oral-formulaic studies that I both welcome and recognize—and indeed feel part of. Let me delineate briefly how I see these and how they to some extent parallel the developments I described in the previous section.

The argument is increasingly to be heard that not all "traditions" or "traditional" poetries are necessarily the *same*. There is, after all, not just one identifiable thing called "oral tradition" nor even "oral traditional composition." As Foley argues in the context of presenting the exciting new developments in oral-formulaic studies, different societies, languages, prosodies, or "mythic repositories" must produce different "oral traditions" (1986:13), so that modern oral-formulaic scholarship is now concerned with the "Protean morphology" of tradition as much as—or at least as well as—with setting up "the rules of the overall grammar" (14). Foley further reinforces this point in the admirable conclusion to his 1988 survey, where he highlights the move away from the earlier stress on similarities to an interest in specific contrasts between traditions in terms of their particular poetic practices, genres, and textual status (109):

> We can afford to set alongside the exciting similarities among literatures and individual texts a complementary account of their necessary differences, thus assembling a comparative profile that does justice to each of the comparanda in addition to furnishing a sense of the whole.

Following on from this, the scope has now often widened to include more research on "modern" as well as historical traditions, and in building on these too when constructing more general analyses as well as (if still a little subservient to) the particular example of South Slavic epic so elevated by Parry and Lord. Along the same lines are recent encouragements to more fieldwork on contemporary traditions (see Foley 1988:110 and various examples published in *Oral Tradition*), which in turn has extended research to include more on processes of change, interplay between genres, interactions between audiences and performers, performance conventions, and varying interpretations—questions more easily explored in in-depth

[9] As Renoir points out in his recent book (1988:ch. 4), Lord has often been to the fore in qualifying and developing the theories so powerfully propounded in his *The Singer of Tales* (1960). This is a case, perhaps, not so much of changing his original views as of his being part of a more general and developing intellectual movement that he has also helped to form.

field studies than in archive texts. These questions have in turn fed back into the more conventional studies of historical texts, so that there too new assessments and new investigations can now be undertaken.

An interest in personal artistry has always been one feature of the oral-formulaic school (often ahead of other disciplines in this respect). There was a sensitivity, arising no doubt from the Yugoslav fieldwork, to the contribution of individual singers, well exemplified in Lord's appreciation of the art of Avdo Medjedovic' (Parry and Lord 1974). This emphasis seems to have been expanding even further in recent years—and extending beyond just the Slavic example—with more detailed studies of how individual artists manipulate and build on the traditional conventions (see, for example, Foley 1986, Orbell 1990). Here too oral-formulaic analysts can be seen as part of a wider trend—which they themselves have played a part in creating.

It is significant too that the journal *Oral Tradition*'s editorial brief includes the "relationships between oral and written traditions," illustrating a similar interest to that found in other disciplines in the interactions and blends between oral and written forms. Unlike some of the earlier oral-formulaic publications that presupposed a possibly insurmountable divide between oral and literate modes—so much so that a particular style could be taken as evidence for allocating a given text to one or the other category—the current focus seems to be more and more on "transitional" texts. As elsewhere, the varying ways in which orality and literacy interact are coming to be accepted as a *normal* process and hence questions about how this works in specific contexts have, equally, become a normal subject of study.[10]

There seems to be somewhat less interest among oral-formulaic scholars than others in the arguably more political and divisive facets of tradition (this impression may of course merely be my own ignorance of relevant work). But given the increasing influence of this approach elsewhere, my guess is that it may only be a matter of time before such questions are taken up in oral-formulaic contexts too. Here also the newer moves may have painful consequences. Once again the older once-certain terms are no longer so clear. The labels of "tradition" and "traditional" now have to be approached with caution, and the field of study that these terms once served to delimit no longer has unchallenged boundaries. At the very least, the boundaries now demand more investigation than once seemed at all necessary, so that the claimed property of being "traditional" now needs explanation and justification rather than just its bare assertion. Once again, there are no easy answers. But a response in terms of

[10] See, for example, the essays on "oral tradition in literature" in Foley 1986 (particularly the fascinating accounts in Lord's essay) and on transitional texts in Foley 1987.

tolerating a variety of different approaches, including interdisciplinary and open-ended ones, is probably the sign of the times here too.

What Tradition from Milman Parry?

Let me wind up by going back to Milman Parry and relating his contribution to the argument I have been putting forward so far. One standard way of regarding Parry is naturally as the progenitor of "the oral theory"—the traditional ancestor, as it were, the Homeric *och' aristos hapantôn* as Foley puts it in the dedication to Parry's memorial volume (1987). As such we also of course have to see Parry too as a child of his times. So even while we salute him for the brilliance that started off a great intellectual movement with wide ramifications for later scholarship, we have to remember that he naturally shared some of the earlier assumptions and attitudes about tradition that would now be questioned from the viewpoint of modern work.

However, the point I want to emphasize about Milman Parry is a different one. This is to stress *not* the possible outdatedness of some of his views, but, on the contrary, how modern he seems to be in so many ways. His basic approaches and insights are still remarkably relevant for the new perspectives of modern scholarship. Further, I would stress not just the way he was prepared to question some of the older ideas of his time—though that too is an example worth noting—but also his *positive* contributions.

First and most remarkable was his use of fieldwork. Parry wanted both to understand specificities and to put them in a wider comparative perspective. In this respect he followed a strategy that would also be highly congenial to many modern scholars: that he should first thoroughly understand the specific culture that he wished to use as the basis of the wider generalities. For him the key to this was apparently lengthy and detailed field investigation, the "starting point for a comparative study of oral poetry" (Parry 1971:469). As he himself seems to have been well aware, arguing mainly "on the basis of a logical reasoning" from Homer was not sufficient foundation; he wanted to supplement this—indeed to see how far the "hypothesis" suggested by the study of Homer could be verified—by observing and studying the practice of a "still living oral poetry" (Parry and Lord 1954:4-5).

The specific details of his field methods are apparently not very fully written up (nor are they in many anthropological publications, I may say). But from what I can glean from passing remarks (Parry 1971:xxxv ff. and ch. 17 by Albert Lord), his thoroughness and approach in terms of both observation and questioning seem truly impressive. Unlike some

researchers—even quite recent ones—he was not content merely to make a brief trawling expedition for a collection of texts nor to rely on "haphazard and fragmentary" reports from others (Parry and Lord 1954:4), but followed his first summer visit (1933) with a longer field period of over a year (1934-35) so as to observe the singers in action and performances in context.

He and his collaborators were also very modern in their use of state-of-the-art recording devices—updating them, indeed, over the years to make the work more convenient and effective. Again unlike researchers for whom recording and technology seem to become unquestioned ends in themselves, Parry took a reflective and self-critical approach to their deployment, and also built pertinently on his recordings for his analysis. Indeed, it was Parry's pioneering and imaginative use of audio recordings that strikingly revealed the textual variability and significance of performance in oral poetry, a basis and benchmark for so much later fieldwork and analysis.

Note too the contemporary-sounding stress on observing and analyzing not just texts—the products of "tradition"—but the *processes* behind these products. In this context he is still in the forefront of modern scholarship—indeed has played, and still plays, a crucial part in forming it. In contrast to approaches that I queried above, Parry seems *not* to have been primarily concerned with the "old" nor with antiquarian ventures to preserve "surviving" products from the far past. Rather he explored the active practice of the poets and how the living tradition of oral poetry actually worked in a specific culture and genre, "the study of the *functioning and life* of an oral narrative poetry" (quoted in Parry and Lord 1954:15 [quoted in Foley 1988:32], italics added). His aim was to investigate

> the actual practice of the poetry. . . . We can learn not only how the singer puts together his words, and then his phrases, and then his verses, but also his passage and themes, and we can see how the whole poem lives from one man to another, from one age to another, and passes over plains and mountains and barriers of speech—more, we can see how a whole oral poetry lives and dies (quoted in Parry and Lord 1954:5).

Once again, such statements have an emphatically modern ring in their stress on active processes—*how* poems were composed and transmitted rather than just the analysis of texts on their own. What is more, he was able to go some way, together with Lord, in achieving these aims and elucidating the issues for others. Like Parry, modern scholars are now once more returning to the need to look not just at verbal products but the practices that form and exemplify them.

Another modern preoccupation is the emphasis on observing and

annotating *performance* (see discussion and references on this above). Parry's terminology and detailed analysis may not be identical to that of more recent scholars, but the overall impetus is indeed similar, for not only did he take serious account of the way the performance situation influenced—indeed in a sense constituted—the artistic event, but he also apparently interpreted performance in the wider sense that included more than just its *verbal* content. This aspect is now provoking considerable discussion among scholars of oral performance, but there are still relatively few who, like Parry and his associates, have followed the "best practice" of recording and presenting the musical as well as the verbal elements of performance.

It is also interesting to note Parry's interdisciplinary approach, in the sense at least of a preparedness to learn from the most recent work (including sources not at first sight the most obvious ones), and to be critical of some of the accepted wisdom of the time. His own views too developed out of the more philologically focused analysis of texts to include broader comparative and field-based questions. As he explains himself, he modified his own approach away from a sole focus on the concept of "traditional" to that of "oral"—and to the idea of an oral poetic practice that could be a living one, a move both preparatory to and, no doubt, further informed by his dedication to field investigation.[11]

We could do worse than go back to these approaches—these very modern approaches—of Milman Parry's. In other words, perhaps we should neither be satisfied just to criticize some of Parry's more dated notions (although there is a place for that) nor be so hooked on the *specific* findings from the particular culture and genre he studied that we ignore the more general *strategies* that lay behind his study (in some ways arguably more modern than those of some of his followers). In place of the older and often cited tradition of Parry as the discoverer of *the* model of oral traditional poetry and its oral composition based on his South Slavic analogy, now is the time to applaud those scholars who are instead developing the tradition of Parry as a scholar prepared to use up-to-date field methods to explore and test his ideas, to study a specific genre in depth with its own specificities, to look at living practices, not just texts, and to build on the latest interdisciplinary insights.

What about Parry's more general and comparative aspirations? It may be fair enough to query—and I have done so in the past—the universalizing aims implicit, perhaps even explicit, in his overall philosophy, his aim of "obtaining evidence on the basis of which could be drawn a series of generalities applicable to all oral poetries" (Parry and Lord 1954:4). If the assumption is that one should search for universal

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[11] For good descriptions of the nature and development of Parry's thought, see especially the introduction to Parry 1971 and Foley 1988:chs. 1 and 2.

laws or uniform style across *all* oral poetries, this is surely by now an outdated program—but still, what a vision! We can still be rightly inspired by the comparative perspective in Parry's work—not content just to study one genre in its specificities (essential though that initial step may be) but to go on from this specific focus to see it in a wider cross-cultural framework and use the insights from one study for a deeper understanding of others. Indeed, it could be argued that modern trends in the study of tradition have intensified rather than removed the vision behind that basic aspiration. We can learn from Parry's own study, as well as from other parallel cases, not so much to seek for general laws as to look to questions about recurrent features in processes and performances that can help us to understand more sharply the variety of ways in which traditions—and especially the varied traditions of oral formulations—are manifested throughout the world.

Conclusion

So the tradition to inherit and develop from Parry should be, I would argue, not so much his *specific* studies of Homer or of epic nor even the particular case that, together with Albert Lord, he so well investigated in the field, but rather his underlying aspirations and strategies. And it is for us later scholars to both build on and develop this tradition—after all, the best traditions are the flexible and modifiable ones, not those that are frozen unchanged—and to do so in the widest comparative framework, informed by the insights of modern scholarship, as Parry was in his time. Above all, we can follow up his very modern tradition of giving due attention to investigating specifics as well as generalities, of looking at tradition and traditional forms not as distinctive *things* nor as age-old products of the past but as researchable in living *practice*, and of taking a critical and searching—as well as comparatively-oriented—approach to investigating the manifestations and uses of that intriguing and appealing and sometimes treacherous concept "tradition."

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