

JOHN MILES FOLEY: OPEN MIND, OPEN ACCESS, OPEN TRADITION, OPEN FOLEY

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I FIRST MET John in 1974. How long ago it seems, and in the trite phrase how recent it feels. The occasion: an interdisciplinary conference, my first ever, at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. The subject: the formula, then the focus of a veritable academic industry. The participants: its practitioners from across the disciplines. Prominent among them was that gentle man, the guru, Albert Bates Lord, with his followers and acolytes, among them John Miles Foley.

The naive rebel, my good self, was present too, youthful and enthusiastic. I found I was to be well attacked then and later (not that I minded—a compliment I thought it) by the Lord disciples, not least by John himself who was then (necessary no doubt at that stage of his career) a pushy and opinionated graduate student—how unlike the John we came to know later. He was out, naturally, to praise and agree with his mentor, Lord, then the power behind all grants and appointments in his (far-reaching) domain. This was to John's benefit, of course, but it was no self-serving ploy on his part—the results of his own researches, primarily at that stage in Anglo-Saxon but also increasingly supported by comparative knowledge of the classics and of the then-Yugoslavia, seemed wholly to support the accepted position on oral tradition and its formulaic composition-in-performance defining features. At that stage I in no way disliked him. But I was not particularly impressed.

From this unpromising beginning arose a firm friendship and, to my pride, a mutual influence on each other's work, not just, of course, he on mine, but equally—I do not flinch from saying it—me on his: a wonder! He always was one to learn: he becoming less universalist (he needed to!), I more aware, as I had to be, of the characteristics of specific texts as well as performance. Equally to my wonder, I have more than once stood in for him as speaker when he was unable from afflictions like over-commitment or, latterly, death, to attend as planned. Exceedingly proud I have been to do so.

Let me add that a third member of this firm triad of friendship was the distinguished South African scholar Jeff Opland. Then a young scholar, like us at the start of his career, he, too, pushed to give a paper at the conference. It was well worth the effort. He told us about early English scopos (bards)—no surprise to some there—but as well about their parallelism with imbongi, Xhosa praise poets.¹ We were privileged thus to hear the start of his magnificent work on these topics, not least his now ongoing series of Xhosa texts—how John would have, and did, approve! We were also readied to meet Jeff again when he convened a fine conference on orality some years later at which we all three appreciated the increasing convergence of our ideas. We have both benefited, and how greatly, from Jeff's piercing insights, too little known, on epic and on comparative lit-

¹ Opland, "'Scop' and 'Imbongi.'"

erature and oral texts more generally. The interlocking influences of his knowledge and insight have benefited our work, all three, through our scholarly lives. Long may—and will—this continue to be enlarged and taken yet further by those who follow. Such is the path of the scholarship. To this John, great scholar, but in his own eyes merely humble practitioner and apprentice, was devoted.

So let me use the privilege of my slot in this volume to illustrate something of his worth and wisdom by illustrating the main lines of my own interaction with John over those forty or so years, a generation and more. My contribution here, as is natural, given that background, will be personal; as is also natural, given my own background and training, many of my examples will be taken from Africa. Above all, however, I hope that this approach will be fit not to amplify my part on our joint path of scholarship, but to throw some light on John's generosity as a scholar, even to someone whom another person might have regarded as an antagonist or even a competitor; and, equally, his lovely personality: humane, overwhelmingly generous, and, above all, humble.

John the Human Being

In that connection and before going any further, for it helps to explain John's lifelong commitment, and, in a way, humility before the world and in his search for truth and openness to all, let me mention something that, perhaps, rather few people know. This is the reason for his insistence that his name was John Miles Foley, on the face of it an unnecessary amplification and, no doubt, the bane of editors and bibliographers alike. It was because of his grandfather. He was a self-taught scholar of humble origins, John's great inspiration, and one whom he wished throughout his life to emulate and commemorate. John adored his family too: so proud of his (second) wife Anne-Marie and of the children of whom he always spoke so warmly—when asked, that is, for he was not one to thrust them at you.

I am proud to count him among my friends, open in every sense. He will always be that, on this earth and in heaven, where no doubt his insight is still guiding us (as well, no doubt, as in his modest and charming way enlightening the denizens there too—can we not envisage it?). Much more could, and no doubt will, be said by his friends. But, leaving words, it is enough to look deep into his last portrait, it is all there: look there at gentleness and wisdom.

Ann Arbor 1974

That first Ann Arbor conference on "Oral Tradition and the Formula," appropriately hosted by the university's Coördination of Ancient and Modern Studies unit, was the start of many things. At that time the accepted position, following Lord, in his turn following Milman Parry, was that the presence of a "formula" or "formulaic style" was an unerring sign of a work being an example of "oral literature" and necessarily, as such, composed in the classic improvisatory-through-formulae "composition-in-performance" mode enunciated in Lord's already classic study, *Singer of Tales*. I had read and been inspired by this work, specifically in my then-recent *Oral Literature in Africa* and, Oxford-wise and Oxford-trained, assumed that the best compliment was to challenge it. So—naïve—I did.

Here is something of what I said, later when, as with all stimulating conferences, it became part of a book. Essentially, I used (mainly) African material to challenge the notion that formula-based “composition-in-performance” was the only way for a piece of oral literature to arise, even, indeed, to exist at all.² I was sympathetic to this notion, a hugely illuminating one, it seemed to me, for some instances. But not, I knew from the cases I had encountered in Africa or read about elsewhere, for all.

As is by now well known, this ran exactly counter to Lord’s position. “Oral,” he writes, excluding by definition all contrary cases, “does not mean merely oral presentation [...]. What is important is not the oral performance but rather the composition *during* oral performance.”³ What Lord meant was of course elaborated in his illuminating study of oral narrative poetry in Yugoslavia in the 1930s: it is the type of oral composition that in some sense takes place simultaneously with performance, and in which the poet is able to produce lengthy narrative poetry without the use of writing and without interrupting the flow of his narration. For Lord, composition and performance were not just simultaneous acts, they were merely two different aspects of the same act in which the poet produces his own unique composition/performance. Lord’s work has marked such a step forward in the analysis of oral literature, and been so (rightly) admired, that it is often not realized how restrictive a definition of oral composition this was. It excluded any oral compositions which are handed on word-for-word, like certain religious texts.⁴ And while it is true that this kind of immutability will be rather uncommon in oral literature, it still seems unreasonable to exclude such cases as not truly oral just because they do not fit the Yugoslav or Russian model.⁵

More serious was the exclusion of long-considered and deliberate oral composition prior to performance, as in the case of certain oral lyrics. There is clear evidence that this at least sometimes happens, and even if in such cases there is also something of the kind of variation in performance that Lord stresses, clearly we find here an extra dimension not covered in his definition of oral works.⁶ It seemed perverse to exclude the composition of poems by Inuit (Eskimo) poets, where “a man who wants to compose a song may long walk to and fro in some solitary place, arranging his words while humming a melody which he also has to make up,”⁷ the poetic process in the Pacific Gilbert Islands where the poet spends several days alone, polishing and repolishing the poem with which he is “in travail,”⁸ the long-drawn-out processes of composition of Tonga and Ila lyrics, or Chopi choral compositions in central Africa.⁹

There seemed to be an underlying assumption by Lord and his school that the test for a medieval or classical work being “oral” was an “oral-formulaic” style. Lord was con-

2 Finnegan, *Oral Poetry*, especially 155–57.

3 Lord, *Singer of Tales*, 5; emphasis his.

4 Lord, *Singer of Tales*, 280.

5 See Reichl’s contribution to this volume.

6 Lord, “Oral Poetry,” 592.

7 Rasmussen, *Netsilik Eskimos*, 320.

8 Grimble, *Return to the Islands*, 200, 204–5.

9 Jones, *African Music*, 11ff.

fidant about his definition: “we now know exactly what is meant by these terms [“oral poet” and “oral poems”], at least insofar as manner of composition is concerned.”¹⁰ But as had already been pointed out forcefully, formulaic styles also occur in written texts.¹¹ It seemed fair, therefore, to take such works as instances of oral composition. But if so, what about an apparently exactly similar process of composition by a poet (say, in a literate culture) who works out the words of his poem in his head, perhaps using certain formulaic expressions as he goes, and only later writes them down—would this too be oral composition? And, if not, what about a similar process of composition followed by oral dictation to a local scribe or foreign collector? It seemed that there were bound to be problems about exact application and interpretation if one pressed oral composition as a criterion even if one tried to widen the restrictive definition of the oral-formulaic approach and tone down some of its over-confident assertions.

In fine, I argued, the apparent mode of composition and a “formulaic style” clearly tells us something. But they are neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for calling something “oral”: they were relevant features, but were neither self-evident nor absolute. When this argument appeared in my *Oral Poetry* a few years later, John wrote a scathing review.¹² I have to say, too, that it was the only unfair one I have ever had in my long life as a scholar. It was not that it was critical—to be taken seriously is always a tribute—but it was perturbing to have opinions attributed to me that were the exact opposite of those I held and that I was in fact arguing against. Also, apparently I—or rather the exigencies of the then typesetting process—had apparently omitted a diacritical mark in a particular Serbian name. I was taken aback, but, never having encountered such a thing, did not know how to react. Opland, who liked us both, sympathized with my view about its injustice but was very wise—“Leave it,” he said, “ignore it: it will go over.”

He was right, and in the best possible way. When I spent an (inspiring) semester at Austin in 1989, John invited me to lecture to his students in Missouri, and to stay with him and his lovely wife. As she made muffins for our breakfast (so quick—I was filled with admiration) he said, rather quietly, “Sometimes loyalty leads us too far.” It was understood and we needed say no more—just enjoy our rich time together.

The Aftermath

Over the years, John was always generous in inviting me to speak, even on topics which might have seemed to challenge his own preconceptions at the time. He was always willing to open and extend his ideas, a mark of the true scholar (I imagine him doing the same in heaven to the benefit of us all). One was inviting me to give what was at that time the “Milman Parry Lecture on Oral Tradition” (what an unlooked-for honour) at the University of Missouri, to which he so long made a notable contribution in his loving teaching, editing, and research. The talk I gave was a critique—what else, from me?—of the very concept nearest to his heart: oral tradition.

¹⁰ Lord, *Singer of Tales*, 141.

¹¹ For example, Curschmann, “Oral Poetry,” 44–52.

¹² Foley, Review of *Oral Poetry*.

Since this is easily available on the web, I need not go into details here, but it is relevant to sketch the main lines since, as a mark of John's open-mindedness (he surely knew what, from me, was coming) it would seem, on a superficial reading, to run counter to his own position, even, worse, to undermine the presuppositions of his brainchild, *Oral Tradition (OT)*, the journal then starting to make an international mark for itself. Basically, my lecture, later generously published in *OT*, argued the case for a more critical and self-aware approach to this familiar, ambiguous, and often misused term.¹³ "Tradition" and "traditional" were then common terms among anthropologists, folklorists, and oral historians, sometimes, indeed, regarded as defining features of these disciplines. They carried confusing meanings, however. "Tradition" had meant, variously: "culture" as a whole; all the inherited elements in a society; conventionally recognized customs whether or not of any antiquity; the process of handing down practices, ideas, or values, particularly inter-generationally; the products so handed down, sometimes with the further connotation of being "old" or having arisen in some "natural" and non-contentious way. These ambiguities were problem enough, but there were often additional overtones too. Something labelled a "tradition" had so often been taken as unquestionably belonging, neutrally, to the whole of the "community," rather than to specific individuals or interest groups; or somehow to be "natural" and close to the soil rather than, as with written forms, "artificially" constructed.

Many of these associations can be challenged on both theoretical and ethnographic grounds. Far from claimed "traditions" always being old, common to all, or non-polemical, anthropologists, historians, and others have pointed, for example, to the interest of investigating multiple voices, disputed meanings, or the relation between local political structures and the social manipulation of (apparently) established traditions from the past; and few anthropologists would now accept the older model of traditions coming down unchanged through the generations. But the popular assumptions associated with the term, then strong, are long-lasting, and can still sometimes affect even academic usages of it.

Qualifying "tradition" by the term "oral" might seem to make it clearer and more specific, but in practice added yet more ambiguity. It was often unclear, for example, whether the "oral tradition" was oral merely in the sense of being unwritten; whether it was assumed to belong to the group as a whole, and/or to have been transmitted by word of mouth over many generations, perhaps by the community or "folk," rather than conscious individual action, and/or to be accepted as of fundamental value to the community—all common, if unspoken, connotations of the term.

Further, some scholars had fallen into the habit of calling any verbalization captured in research by the label of "oral tradition" and had proceeded to assume a series of consequential—but sometimes false—properties. For example, the highly personal and individually composed Somali love poetry had been called "oral tradition." But these poems emphatically did not date far back in time (even the genre itself was a new one), nor were they ever produced communally. Equally, I continued, it was unwise to accept all claims about "tradition" at face value, the more so because the term had been widely

13 Finnegan, "Tradition, But What Tradition?"

used to represent “just about anything to which anyone wishes to give legitimacy or added luster.”¹⁴ Most important of all, since statements about “oral tradition” tended to be buttressed by a series of politically and personally entrenched values, often intertwined with issues of national or group identity, it could be difficult—even threatening—to unwrap such claims critically, or investigate how far these various connotations (often unconscious) were really supported by the evidence. The alternative would be—and much more in keeping with the scholarly ethic—to retain the term but subject it to critical examination and investigation rather than just assume its varied applications and associations.¹⁵

The Journal Oral Tradition

John also from time to time invited me—though knowing I was always likely to be something of a maverick—to contribute to the great journal he founded, at much cost to his time and, I would guess, resources—the marvellously interdisciplinary (then highly unusual and disapproved by the pundits) and pioneeringly open *Oral Tradition*. What a commitment this manifested, and how typical of him. It was not for himself or his career that he began *OT*, but for forwarding the subject and for outreach to others, yet another of his wonderful contributions to us all (now online at www.journal.oraltradition.org). One feature was the wonderful collection of articles in two special issues of the journal on the work on oral tradition in the various countries of the world: and an amazing and still essential collection it turned out to be. What a network of international scholars he had developed! My own small note, typically I suppose, again critiqued the central term. This time I focused mainly on the concept and ambiguities of “oral” with, among other things, its double meanings of 1) unwritten and 2) spoken, “with the mouth” (from the Latin *os, oris*): the two are not the same (a story told in pictures, for instance, is oral in the first sense, not the second, and many confusions have arisen from not appreciating the difference). Even more potentially confusing is the very title of the journal, but John, typically, was happy for me to say so. These special issues gather together work, from Homeric epics to medieval lays, contemporary African storytelling, modern Basque poetry or American “slam” contests that under any other term would merely disappear as not a subject that could be studied by scholars, something “non-existent” in the focus on single disciplinary work. All this was something which John was able to see beyond, and help others do so too.

One other thing is worth saying in connection with the journal. This was his help to the graduate students he chose not so much to (be paid to) assist him, and so finance their studies (the overt purpose), but rather for them to learn a skill that would be of help in their future careers. But there was more to it. Characteristically, John said little about this, but it came out in one of our conversations. True to his principles, he had refused to serve in Vietnam, at what cost to himself or his loved ones, I do not know.

¹⁴ Henige, *Chronology of Oral Tradition*, 2—a wonderfully wise and pertinent book.

¹⁵ Finnegan, “Problems in the Processing of ‘Oral Texts’”; Finnegan, *Oral Traditions*, 5ff; Henige, *Chronology of Oral Tradition*; and Vansina, *Oral Tradition*.

But then John, he the peace-lover, saw the sufferings of the returning veterans. They had given themselves, seen their comrades suffer and die, been imprisoned, wounded, only to return—to what? Not a grateful country, but reviling. He of all people saw it. And not just saw, but made sure they had support and a valued role, and—what else can I call it—love, as they worked with him on the journal. I seldom saw him more moved as when, quietly, he spoke of this.

Advances in Oral Literature Research

Then there was the conference in Belgrade, the Lord and Foley stamping ground. The keynote speaker was to have been John but, characteristically, much though I imagine he would have liked to have been present, he would not let down his promised contribution to the Folklore Fellows workshops in Scandinavia. I was asked—an honour—to speak instead. Naturally, I referred to him and my memories of him as a graduate student—to the delight of the younger members of the audience who had not imagined that he could possibly have started out as just like one of them!—a useful lesson (maybe some of them are, in turn, inspired by him, touching the frontiers of knowledge).

The subject of the conference, a demanding one with many challenging and informative expert papers, was “Advances in Oral Literature Research.” My contribution, invoking John’s presence, then, as now, so much with us, was first to extend the term to remind the participants of the many cultural processes and products which, though handed down over time, are not written: myths, genealogies, shared images within a particular community about their history, family traditions, local folk beliefs, oral narratives, indeed, any established custom or repeated routine that exhibits some continuity from the past (or is believed to do so) and is transmitted, not through writing, but by word of mouth.¹⁶ Then there are the more restricted meanings, as found in anthropology and other humanistic disciplines (especially folklore), in the specific sense of unwritten literary forms and verbal arts, extensively collected and analyzed in its many formats from short proverbs or riddles to major genres, such as panegyrics or epic. What has misled many, however, is thankfully already being challenged by such knowledgeable scholars as Mark Amodio (see among his other works, his edited volume *New Directions in Oral Theory*, which focuses in particular on medieval texts and their setting) but of much wider relevance is the assumption that “oral” tradition is somehow mutually exclusive with written forms, as if in a separate and self-contained channel. But, as Amodio has repeatedly pointed out and proved through a plethora of highly pertinent medieval cases—and by then John would have whole-heartedly agreed—in both classical and medieval times, not to speak of now, the two (if indeed they can be regarded as two, except in the sense of points along a connected continuum) continually flow into and out of each other—a new concept to some of the participants at that conference and elsewhere.

The further point was that “oral” sung and spoken forms (did not the Greek and the medieval *musica* mean “sung words” with no divide between them?) are continu-

¹⁶ Finnegan, “Oral Literature.”

ally being created and absorbed into the literary tradition, most notably, the wonderful Spanish decima ten-line rhyming verse with a sting in the tail form, that is now found in all Hispanic areas of the world and, at the conference, was so dramatically illustrated in exciting live events in the beautiful old buildings of Belgrade. This was an impromptu series of verses delivered without writing and prior notice in a stirring series of contests full of literary, political, and personal allusion (individuals in the audience might squirm!) adorned with beauty and wit, to be judged—an essential part of the proceeding—by the enthusiastic and knowledgeable audience.

These points were, for me, as, indirectly, for John, finely illustrated in the oral literatures of Africa. When I myself first encountered African oral texts just after the mid-twentieth-century, they were basically envisaged as something old, to be explained in terms of “tradition” and the heritage from the past: the established backward-looking approach that has cast so long a shadow on the conceptualization and study of oral forms. I vividly recall being chided both orally and in writing by the influential American folklorist Richard Dorson for allowing my study of “oral literature” to stray beyond its apparently proper field of “folk traditions”.¹⁷ “Composed topical songs, connected, say, with internal politics, as in the examples [...] she gives of the bickering in Guinea between the French administration party of Barry Diawadou and the R.D.A. [...] party of Sekou Touré, hinge on passing personalities and do not sink into tradition.”¹⁸ He concludes by arguing that in focusing on the tribal inheritance, the folklorist will be looking at “traditional cultures hidden under and penetrating into modern ways.”¹⁹ Even now, there are traces of this perspective. But overall, the field looks very different. Oral texts are no longer automatically assumed to belong to the past with deep roots in traditional culture, fit objects to be scripturalized into written text. Scholars now look for their examples to young people as well as the old, to the educated and not just the non-literate, to towns as well as the countryside, to industrial workers and broadcast performers, and to disruptive or innovative forms, not just the old guard. Change and contemporaneity are now part of the picture, and “tradition” is rightly seen as a malleable concept or practice that people play on and manipulate.

All this has contributed to an altered vision of oral texts, no longer automatically assigned to some uniform “tradition” of the past, but also as creatures of the present. Recent studies take in their stride such examples as a child praise-singer on South African television, poetry on video or the web, pop groups in urban settings, Hausa market-place burlesque, life stories, love songs, community theatre, a rap band, trade union songs, praises for the Namibian Otjiherero radio service, for Nelson Mandela, or for the South African football team, and the intersection of writing, voice, and broadcast media in a plethora of contexts. Poetry, song, and story turned to political purposes or ideological struggle now come unquestionably within the scholarly purview. There are studies of Ethiopian peasants using poems to comment on the 1975 land reforms or 1990s regime change, of the poetry of civil war or independence struggle, of “electric griots,”

¹⁷ Dorson, “Africa and the Folklorist,” 10.

¹⁸ Dorson, “Africa and the Folklorist,” 17.

¹⁹ Dorson, “Africa and the Folklorist,” 67.

of oral performances relating to AIDS, of praises for graduation ceremonies, and of “performing the nation” through song, music, and dance in contemporary Tanzania.

And it is no longer “collective” tradition, but the ways that individuals—now often named—manipulate the repertoire. Thus, another study documents how the poet-singer Micah Ichegbeh builds on an Igede tradition called *adiyah* which incorporates “proverbs, masquerades, dialogue, riddle, mimicry, spectacle and song [...] drawing its great resonance from its direct response to Igede experience.”²⁰ He is shown turning his talents on the 1979 elections when Shagari of the National Party of Nigeria became the first elected civilian President of Nigeria, defeating the Unity Party of Nigeria leader Awolowo. His electrifying performance celebrated political victory and mocked political defeat:

Awolowo did dare to touch Shagari
A duel is in the making
A duel is in the making, surely!
A duel is in the making
Just like Omakwu did dare to touch Ogo Okpabi
A duel is in the making
A duel is in the making, surely!
A duel is in the making
(Between) NPN, UPN
A duel is in the making
A duel is in the making, surely!
A duel is in the making.²¹

The performance by Ichegbeh’s ensemble on July 27, 1981 held its audience rapt by its captivating melody, and his group was victorious: “the audience yelled in jubilation and rose in unison to roar out a thunder of applause so loud that it was heard many kilometres from the site.”²² Far from conceptualizing oral texts as something of the past, such studies now increasingly present them as part of the ongoing concerns, great and small, of modern life. In Ichegbeh’s performance, furthermore, the audience’s participation and their “thunder of applause” were central to his art: it is hard “to recreate a live sense of Ichegbeh’s *Adiyah* performance in cold print because Ichegbeh is a volatile performer whose voice, stage body movement, gestures and rapport with the audience are better heard than seen.”²³ And besides the diverse relations between performer and audiences, there is now interest in the potentially changing dynamics during performance, and the spectrum of roles, more, or less, sustained in differing situations, which can extend well beyond the immediate moment into the complexities of publics, counter-publics, and pathways of circulation.

This has reinforced the recognition that multiple actors can be involved in any given performance, and hence, in at least some senses in (various stages of) the “oral text” that may eventuate. Scholars are now looking not just to performers, audiences, and fans, but also to organizers and publishers, transcribers, and translators (creative roles too, as

²⁰ Ogede, “Role of the Igede Poet,” 53.

²¹ Ogede, “Role of the Igede Poet,” 54.

²² Ogede, “Role of the Igede Poet,” 54.

²³ Ogede, “Role of the Igede Poet,” 53.

we saw in the previous section). And this can also mean going beyond the participants' overt actions as performers or audiences to consider that they, too, are interpreters and analysts—interpretive voices that in the past regularly went unheard, given the long presumption that outsiders were the knowledgeable analysts. Once again, the apparently simple object, "the oral text," has become re-conceived into something more complex and multi-layered.

All this has promoted a new look at activities in the past, too, no longer automatically assigning them to some supposedly unchanging "oral tradition" of earlier times, or by-passing cases held to be "non-indigenous." There is, thus, a renewed interest in historical accounts of earlier genres or events like, for example, the "concert parties" that flourished in the Gold Coast from the early twentieth century, Islamic literary forms,²⁴ the Xhosa poet using his panegyric craft to praise the Christian God rather than his chief in 1827,²⁵ or the annual Snow White show produced since 1935 in a Zaire mission school run by Bavarian sisters with its mix of "Lomongo songs, tunes from German folklore, Tyrolian costumes, and the young Zairean girls' sense of acting."²⁶ So, too, with other documented forms which might once have been bypassed as "imported" or "foreign"—the kinds of examples to which many of us paid too little attention in past years.

Newly emergent genres or forms drawing on a mix of languages or media are no longer automatically brushed aside as somehow hybrid or "untraditional" (and so somehow not counting), but as part of the whole picture, consonant with the more recent approaches which bring out both the "normality" and the rhetorical effectiveness of what would once have been dismissed as "mixed" genres. This goes with the (belated) recognition that adaptive and changing genres are nothing new in Africa—or anywhere, presumably. They have been an accepted part of Hausa culture for generations, for example,²⁷ and there are notable studies, too, of newly developing genres such as the Somali heello,²⁸ or the hymns of the Zulu Nazarite church.²⁹ Or take the bandiri form in Sokoto, where solo male-voice performances accompanied by drums and a chorus of girls or young men draw together standard Islamic vocabulary with a delivery style reminiscent of both praise singers and Indian film song;³⁰ a successful female pop singer in Mali, or the many film representations of the mythic Sunjata tale and other narratives;³¹ Zulu radio drama;³² or the 1998 release of a CD by a Xhosa praise poet set

²⁴ See among many others Orwin and Topan, "Islamic Religious Poetry"; and Gérard's well titled *Afrique Plurielle*.

²⁵ Kaschula, "'Imbongi to Slam,'" 431.

²⁶ Peek and Yankah, *African Folklore*, 254.

²⁷ See Furniss, *Poetry, Prose, and Popular Culture*.

²⁸ Johnson, *Heellooy Heelleellooy*.

²⁹ See also the many cases in Andrzejewski, Pilaszewicz, and Tyloch, *Literatures in African Languages*; Finnegan, *Oral and Beyond*; and Kaschula, "'Imbongi to Slam.'"

³⁰ Buba and Furniss, "Youth Culture," 30.

³¹ Jørholt, "Africa's Modern Cinematic Griots."

³² Gunner, "Wrestling with the Present."

to contemporary hip-hop music in a mixture of Xhosa and English³³—all these, nowadays, seem as appropriate for study as the poetry and stories documented by the nineteenth and early twentieth-century scholars. By now, partly due to John's work with the journal, *Oral Tradition*, such cases no longer seem strange or odd. Modern popular culture is a scene of metamorphoses and mutations, in which written texts are performed, performed texts can be given a written recension, and a network of allusions and cross-references enables audiences in whatever state of literacy to access texts in one way or another.

The study of broadcast and recorded media has similarly taken on new vitality. Richard Fardon and Graham Furniss's study of African broadcast cultures ranges from local radio stations in African languages in Benin or advertising on Hausa radio to the multiple voices of Sudanese airspace and much more.³⁴ Admittedly, scholars still sometimes patronize or marginalize commercial or broadcast media, or forms popular among urban workers or youth fans; but they are certainly now more often taken as serious subjects for study, challenging the earlier backward-looking perspective on oral texts. The rapid spread and establishment of this wide field has been one of the striking developments over recent years.

And then there is also—to return, as still seems necessary for me as for John, once more to this key theme—the interest in the complex interweaving of oral with written forms, which brings oral texts into conjunction with the study of written literatures, including in “postcolonial” studies. It is true that (as will be discussed later) the terms of such analyses can be controversial. The point here, however, is that what was once envisaged as a distinctive and separate field—the products of “traditional Africa”—now comes squarely within what many would regard as the “mainstream,” relevant for debates about contemporary written literatures.

Oral texts are, in consequence, no longer automatically conceived as something rooted in one language, linguistic unit, or “tribal” culture, but as potential players in a cosmopolitan arena. This should actually be nothing new. After all, there have been global connections for centuries in and beyond Africa (to take just one, much misunderstood and underestimated continent)—international trade in goods and people, movements and settlements, missionary proselytizing in Christianity or Islam, colonial encounters, cultural and political links. Diasporic practitioners and commentators have entered the picture too, together with the intercontinental distribution of African-related popular forms like rap music, hip-hop, or dub poetry. Certain genres and performances will, of course, continue to have local flavour, or play creatively with themes and images which resonate in particular ways among specific groups. But scholars now also accept the existence of far-flung forms and trends, especially in music and film, which interact within and across Africa, interwoven into the complex spectrum of multi-media arts and activities across the globe.

The importance of performance is by now well recognized across a wide range of disciplines today (certainly not confined to studies of Africa) and explored in a variety of

33 Kaschula, “‘Imbongi and Griot,’” 62; and Kaschula, “‘Imbongi to Slam.’”

34 Fardon and Furniss, *African Broadcast Cultures*.

ways too extensive to elaborate further here. But there is also a further twist in the long dialectic of “text” and “performance,” for the focus on performance is now being balanced by a revival of interest in “text”—or at any rate in the “something” by virtue of which performance itself is more than just the performing moment. To quote Lauri Honko,

“The performance is king” paradigm relativized text, the next paradigm will probably relativize performance. Any performance is a compromise, an intelligent adaptation of tradition within unique situations structured by a confluence of several factors. It can be understood only against a broader spectrum of performances of the same integer in similar and different contexts.³⁵

Taken together with the concept of “entextualizing” as process, this has meant a new look at the relations between textuality and performing, seeing them not as counterpoised but as essentially co-dependent and co-present. From this perspective, all literary forms are, in a way, double-sided. They are indeed created in the magic moment of experienced performance, but also enlarged into, rooted in, or reverberating with something more abstracted, detachable from the flow, imbued with memories and connotations for its participants, which go beyond the immediate moment. The continuing focus on performance is thus now being complemented by a renewed interest in the ways that performance does not, after all, exist solely in the vanishing moment. It is not just a single event, a situated outburst of sound and movement, but a performance of *something*. There is a sense in which, beyond its evanescent performance, it also exists as an object for reference and exegesis.

Current conceptualizations of oral texts, then, have moved us towards more complex and problematic issues than the simplex uniform one-line text that was once the influential framework for outside scholars’ analysis and reflection. The established—and still valuable—awareness of “context” and “performance” has been enlarged by new perspectives on entextualization and the integral, if riddling, interrelation of performance and text. To understand what have in the past been regarded as “oral texts,” we have to go beyond just the “words” and just the evanescent moment, into a host of multiplexities.

That brings me to John’s *How to Read an Oral Poem*, published in 2002. It is rightly regarded as a classic work, the one book of all others that I would urge all beginning students—specialists too—to read. Rather than try to summarize it—it must be read (and fortunate I was, being asked to review it for the press, as no doubt he was for some of mine, to read it early: thus have our ways been entwined). Let me merely recommend it to all who have not yet encountered it for its perspicacity, openness, insight, and beautifully flexible presentation as well as its marvellously pertinent illustrations (the brilliant cover alone, found of course by John himself, starts us on its complex story). Having started somewhat (in my terms) narrow in both methodology and subject matter in his loyalty to Lord’s (at the time revolutionary) approach, he had now flung wide the gates.

This widening of vision in many circles has been crucial for modern approaches to what was once commonly ring-fenced as “oral tradition.” Oral texts, insofar as they can be envisaged as having some kind of distinctive existence at all, are now conceived not as essentially belonging to some old and somehow autochthonous shared tradition, but

35 Honko, *Textualization of Oral Epics*, 13.

as created, changed, and manipulated for many purposes and through many media by active participants in the world, in the present no less than past.

The Religions, John, and Electronic Media

My memory of John leads me on to a further occasion which became, for me, one of revelation, a wonderful conference led by Werner Kelber and Paula Sanders at Rice University on orality and literacy in the three great world religions. As the proceedings are reproduced in *OT*,³⁶ let me merely say that my own contribution, printed there, was to draw a parallel between the recent concept of “multi-literacies,” introduced, rightly, to break up the over-generalized and a-temporal notion of “literacy” by the new term “multi-oralities,”³⁷ for there are many ways in which a text can be “oral” in its lineage (performance, transmission, setting, and functions). It is only too easy to conflate these and so be misled, and fall over again into the trap of overgeneralization, as so many first-generation oral-formulaicists did.

The new advance towards openness in the conference was, of course, both John’s always genial presence among us and his keynote lecture. This was not included in the published version of the conference proceedings in *OT* for, modest as ever, as general editor he omitted his own voice! Generously, he responded to my request to have a copy of the text; otherwise, apart from the adapted version in his final wonderful book *Oral Tradition and the Internet: Pathways of the Mind*, posthumously published by the University of Illinois Press, it could have been lost to us, but is now, thankfully, available in the printed version edited by the original conference convenors.³⁸ In his “John” fashion, he began with some deprecating remarks, characteristically making us smile at him and at his “conceits” (one of John’s nice double-meaning terms) then going on, in his usual fashion, in rather formal, slightly stiff lecture-delivery-mode. But what content! To our amazement and edification, will those of us there ever forget? It was one of those “eureka” moments when, for the first time, we suddenly saw what we had always known, or should have, but never noticed before—well summed up in the paper’s title, “Ancient and Modern Democracies: Orality, Texts, and Electronic Media” (was not John ever concerned for democratizing) where the new age saw oral and electronic texts converging with the same characteristics of mutability, accessibility, and openness.

Opening to the World

It was then, or soon after, that John extended *OT*’s reach to the world. I imagine that this had always been part of his (perhaps hidden) mission, so well aided by Anne-Marie. It was not just on the international campus of the University of Missouri that he reached out, or at workshops at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London, but in Scandinavian folk schools, and in visits throughout the world where

36 See *OT* 25 (2010).

37 Finnegan, “Response,” 14.

38 Foley, “Ancient and Modern Democracies.”

“contacts” quickly became both friends and colleagues (not, perhaps I should add—who is perfect?—that he was exactly good at replying to emails!). He brought his long expertise to bear in the recognition and recording of Chinese epics, transmitted Basque poetic contexts, and directed attention to music and slam contests. His contribution was eventually, and rightly, recognized by an international award from the University of Missouri a few years before his death.

And then came what some will justifiably call his greatest contribution: pioneering not so much the concept as the practice of open access, a term that many years later has now become internationally accepted by all, except what I call the dinosaur scholars (and publishers). *OT*, in other words, became a journal that could be read by all who had access to the internet, and thus throughout the world, by people at whatever level, from whatever background—and, this was important to him, for free.³⁹ He was one of the first, if not the very first, to accomplish this in the humanities.

There was more—and highly contentious it was too. *OT* had started as a conventional academic journal, if an unusually imaginative one in its interdisciplinary span, mode of dissemination, and openness to new ideas. But now for the revolution! It was henceforward to be open to contributors throughout the world, whoever they were and whatever their background, academic or (horror to some!) “amateur” and “local” in background and approach, though still, of course—his principles and standards held good—refereed as fit for publication.

Though I have long regarded myself as forward-looking, even revolutionary, this took me a little time to digest. By now I am thoroughly in accord. To his editors and editorial board, however, it was at first anathema. “Standards!” “Scholarship!” “Responsibility to our academic peers!” He persevered. “What about our responsibility to the world?” And “if we treat oral tradition as our bailiwick are we to refuse the voices of those who carry it?” Of course he had his way—for all his gentleness, who could withstand his wisdom? And look what benefits we are seeing.

And by now? Now we see that “peer review,” so close to the conventional academic heart can take place after publication as well as, even sometimes instead of, beforehand. The gateways have opened. And afterwards is where critique and feedback can most fruitfully be taken account of and changes made as John himself modelled by responding to critiques raised by those who read *Oral Tradition and the Internet* for the University of Illinois Press.⁴⁰ *OT*, furthermore, is now being read as never before. In its electronic incarnation, as it is rightly claimed on the *OT* webpage, it reaches more than 20,000 readers in 216 countries and territories of the world. A pioneer indeed.

³⁹ Foley, “Editor’s Column.” Following its move to a fully digital format, all the print-only volumes of the journal were scanned so that the complete run of the journal is now electronically searchable and freely accessible to all.

⁴⁰ See Foley, *Oral Tradition and the Internet*, 23–27.

Farewell—but not

And then I recall that last, deeply moving, conference in Finland, home of folklore scholarship—an inspiring international conference in Helsinki on “Register.” The keynote lecture was advertised to be by the leading world scholar, John Miles Foley. Alas, it was not to be: a few months before the conference, he moved further along his way to, as they say, a better place.

They had to make do with me. As the audience wished, I stood up to speak first, a little, about him and his work, and invoked his presence, modest and wise as ever. We felt it there, around us. Then, as he would, I believe, have wished, I spoke not only as a scholar but from the heart (and that was hard) as a person. First came my academic views on the subject. Then I moved away from the podium and finally sat, as if reporting an anthropological case observed in the field (difficult, indeed, somewhat threatening even for an experienced speaker like myself—but John was there, supporting me) of “her” (my) experience. This time it was of my dreaming, a subject that anthropologists have certainly written of, though not yet enough. I spoke in words, not till then told, but ones that, though as yet unknown to him, John somehow inhabited, of how poems came to me in dreams, ready-made in their rhythms, rhymes, verbal assonances, and meaning—that Shakespeare-like twist in the tale. I might have added—but the time had not yet come—how later a novel downloaded itself in the same way to me, a chapter a night, written down the next day as if from a taped African tale, one where I might indeed play with the best formatting and punctuation (neither set in oral texts but, as John knew well, a matter of discretion for the scribal transcriber), but never the meaning.

That oral-to-writing process (how John would have rejoiced in its inception and study, and how sad that I cannot show it to and have him dissect it) was like the “writing” of “Kubla Khan,” but infinitely longer. Would that the parallels—there must be some, Milton perhaps, or Homer, if we but knew (by now I imagine that John does)—were written about. The process has been, in a sense, validated as it was published in 2015 by a reputed New York press as *The Black-Inked Pearl*, a title based on a lovely Shakespeare sonnet and, rich as ever, a quotation from a Rumi poem. It has been written, somehow, not really by me, and every time I read it, having in the meantime, like a possessed medium, forgotten it, it seems the story of my still unfolding life. I think John would have loved it (perhaps already does), as an ultimately oral text: the literature to which, as to opening out to the world, John devoted his psyche, his soul, and breath.

John, we thank and honour you for your opening of minds: ours and the world’s, as well, mark of the great scholar, as your own; for opening access and tradition to all; open as a person to his family, his friends, his world; whether in heaven (or whatever metaphor you prefer: he was never narrow-minded in his terminology or his ideas) or on earth a pioneer, a friend to us all.

Opener of hearts, long will your sweet memory live.

Author Bibliography Ruth Finnegan, an anthropologist and multi-award winning writer (fiction, nonfiction, screen), is Emeritus Professor, the Open University, holder of the Royal Anthropological Institute's Rivers Memorial Medal, Fellow of the British Academy and the American Folklore Society, and Honorary Fellow of Somerville College Oxford. Her publications mainly focus on literary issues, communication (including par-anormal) and musical practices, and include, notably, *Oral Literature in Africa* (1970), *Oral Poetry* (1992), *The Hidden Musicians* (2013), *Communicating* (2014), *Why do we quote?* (2011), and (edited) *Entrancement: The Consciousness of Dreaming, Music and the World* (2017) plus several (dream-inspired) novels. Her most recent projects are as joint editor of *Hearing Others' Voices*, a new/transcultural and transdisciplinary series for young adults (www.balestier.com/category/hearing-others-voices), and intensive preproduction work on a screenplay to be filmed in 2020.