Writing Orality

Temsula Ao

It would be pertinent to begin this essay by asking a few basic questions: What is oral tradition?

Is it merely something which does not have a written form and is therefore of a different order from written literature?

What does it consist of then?

There have been many definitions of oral tradition but the one that has been chosen as being simple but comprehensive is by N. Scott Momaday, an American Indian writer, from his essay 'The Man Made of Words':

'The oral tradition is that process by which the myths, legends, tales and lore of a people are formulated, communicated and preserved in language by word of mouth, as opposed to writing. Or it is a collection of such things.'[1]

He further says that the tradition implies 'a separate and distinct order of reality' which is not concerned with 'an accurate representation of actuality, but with the realization of the imaginative experience'. In contrast to the comprehensiveness of this definition, the term 'orality' sounds restrictive and reductive because it merely seems to differentiate the 'form' rather than point to the relationship between the written and the oral, both of which employ language as the means of expression. According to Sitakant Mahapatra,

'Oral tradition is structured on orality but orality itself is a loaded and fairly ambiguous term. It is all the more problematic when we have to analyze it as a functional dimension of a written text, which, after all, was its function for a long time and which is still its function in many oral cultures round the globe.'[2]

The focus of this paper however, is not to dwell on the problematic of orality and oral tradition but to examine the ramifications of the basic act of verbalization on human behaviour and culture.

'It seems to me that in a certain sense we are all made of words; that our most essential being consists in language. It is the element in which we think and dream and act, in which we live our daily lives. There is no way in which we can exist apart from the morality of the verbal dimension.[3]'

These words, again from Momaday, seem to capture the very essence of what we mean by the term 'oral tradition' and which transcends the boundaries of time, space and memory because through the stories, songs, myths, legends, proverbs and riddles man has recorded his understanding of the human experience through language. He seems to be saying that it is only when we truly understand the role of verbalization can we manage our knowledge of the world and ourselves. At the same time by investing the spoken word with something sacral, 'the morality of the verbal dimension', Momaday is referring to the power and sanctity of the spoken word which was the hallmark of ethical behaviour in early oral cultures.

But the perspective on oral tradition seems to differ in societies where there is a long history of literacy and a written tradition. In these societies the oral form is generally identified with the illiterate and even the 'uncivilized'. But when 'literacy' and 'civilization' have come to the oral cultures all over the world, what has become of their oral traditions? Have they been made redundant by the written, typographic or electronic culture? This is where we need to ask the vital question: what is the relevance of an oral tradition in such a situation and how have the literate, educated inheritors of such traditions dealt with their inheritance? We find the best examples of the continuity of the oral tradition in the writings of indigenous people about their native philosophy, religious beliefs and the 'new literature' that was created out of the vast resources of the oral tradition. *Kalevala*, the Finnish national epic is the most outstanding example of how an oral tradition attains the status of 'literature' once it is transferred to the written medium. *Kalevala* is a compilation of old Finnish ballads and lyrical songs depicting 'the sons of Kalevala' painstakingly collected and arranged by Elias Lonrot as part of a patriotic movement. The collection of thirty two cantos had been compiled

from oral poetry most of which Lonrot himself had recorded among the illiterate folk of north-eastern Finland and the border areas of Karelia. In 1849, Lonrot published an enlarged version of the 1835 edition of the *Kalevala*, which the world now knows as the Finnish national epic. It has many features which are comparable to other folk cultures and literature in many parts of the world, for example, ancient belief systems and world views. Considered as a piece of imaginative literature, *Kalevala* represents the unique way how Lonrot's efforts transformed the poems of the 'little tradition' of ordinary folk into national literature in the 'great tradition' of education and civilization.

Another example is the renascence of Native American literature in recent times which owes its impetus to the centuries-old oral tradition of the people, as Geary Hobson, the editor of the book *The Remembered Earth* (1979) asserts in the introductory chapter.

'...Native American people have been accustomed to remembering their histories and their ways of life through intricate time-proven processes of storytelling. It is only recently that these ways of storytelling have become designated by scholars as oral tradition.[4]'

He goes on to say that 'Native Americans are writing about themselves and their people and their writings are based on firm ground, nurtured by strong roots...'[5] These writings are comprised of autobiographies, novels, poetry and drama. The contributors to this volume include American Indians from all over North America and a common theme that runs through these narratives is the affirmation of the Native American identity in the face of imminent extinction. (Never more than a generation from extinction; Momaday).

Take for example a poem entitled *Who Am I?* where the poet William Oandasan, talks about "the far-flung roots" of his history and concludes,

But
I have always been here, inside
Myself, a song of heaven and earth.

Another poet, Joy Harjo, in the poem entitled *The Last Song* talks about his 'rootedness' to the land of his birth.

how can you stand it
he said
the hot Oklahoma summers
where you were born
this humid thick air
is choking me
and I want to go back
to new mexico

it is the only way
I know how to breathe
an ancient chant
that my mother knew
came out of a history
woven from wet tall grass
in her womb
and I know no other way
than to surround my voice
with the summer sound of crickets
in the moist south night air

oklahoma will be the last song
I'll ever sing

The writings of these and the many other authors in this volume which include poems and other narratives, are replete with nostalgia about their cultural tradition which poets like Leslie Marmon Silko and Simon J. Ortiz (in the same volume) claim to be 30,000 years or more.

In the latter's poem entitled 'The Significance of a Veteran's Day', he states :

Let me explain it this way
so that you may not go away

without knowing a part of me
that I am a veteran of at least 30,000 years
when I traveled with the monumental yearning
of glaciers, relieving myself by them,
growing, my children seeking shelter
by the roots of pines and mountains.

In his discussion of the Native American Renascence, Hobson also raises a very pertinent question about this kind of literature:

'Granted that contemporary Native American literature is founded on strong traditional grounds, the tribal beliefs and ways of living, the oral tradition–what of literature in its written form? Isn't it new...? [6]'

The answer to this question will have to be 'Yes' because the fusion of elements of oral tradition with modern conceptualization about themselves has helped such writers to move away from western, euro-centric models and has enabled them to create a totally new literature deeply immersed in traditional sensibilities but at the same time imbued with contemporary perceptions.

If the 'new literature' of Native Americans is concerned about instinctive questions of identity and survival of a people marginalized in their own land, in Africa another literary renascence was evolving with overtly stated goals. While the emphasis of both resurgence was on the oral tradition, the African literary renascence was meant to be a political weapon against the Western colonizers. While talking about the oral traditions of Africa, Ngugi Wa Thiongo states :

'Historically this goes back to time immemorial and is still an integral part of the contemporary African reality. In terms of anti-colonial struggles it has played the most important role. Not surprisingly it is the only tradition against which the colonial state often took firm measures, banning many of the songs and performances and gaoling the artists involved.[7]'

The first step towards creating a literature which would invigorate and re-kindle nationalism in people's minds, especially in the intellectuals, the leaders started to reorganize the existing

syllabi in English departments of African Universities. Thiongo explains the rationale,

'The restructuring would also allow the introduction of works written in English from other regions and cultures, and this included writings of African peoples. More important was the base. It was felt that for us black literature in general and African literature in particular should be at the centre of any special and even temporal linkages to other cultures in Asia, Europe and the Americas. Central to African literature would be what was then initially termed "oral literature".'(ibid. p 107)

The argument for the inclusion of the oral literature was that 'all the genres, the narrative, the poem, drama, which were part of literature, were already there in fully developed form in the oral.'

Perhaps this facilitated the creative transference of these elements into the writings of many African writers who relied heavily on the oral literature of their respective cultures. They became the most remarkable feature of contemporary African narratives in European languages: the extensive use of proverbs, stories, and riddles, which give them an African flavour. Thiongo himself admits, 'I borrowed flavour from African orature-proverbs, riddles and legends, for instance'. Even structurally he says that his own work after *Weep Not Child* 'is clearly influenced by the digressive patterns that one finds in a lot of oral narratives' He further says, 'So the literary grace in my europhone phase was also derived from the oral power of my cultural heritage'. After *Petals of Blood* Thiongo switched to writing in Gikuyu his native language because he felt that as an artist, he must give back something to the language from which he 'borrowed' so much, so that the legacy of the original language does not become 'stolen legacies' preserved in European languages. Here Ngugi has taken a post-colonial attitude towards the language of the colonizer and seems to think that by using oral tradition material in the new kind of literature that was coming out of Africa, the mother-tongue would somehow be depleted of its treasures. This is a debatable point; and many African writers continued to write in English where oral tradition materials like narrative proverbs, song-tales, myths,

folktales, animal fables, fairy tales and ballads found easy accommodation in their works. For example, in his novel, *Things Fall Apart,* Chinua Achebe uses a condensed version of an Igbo folktale called 'Ikemefuna's Song' (Ch.7, p 42) about a perverse and headstrong king who breaks a sacred taboo by eating roast yam which is reserved for and offered in sacrifice to the gods. The song is an attempt by the people to warn him not to commit an act which would compromise himself and the continued prosperity of the people. The song is sung to remind the protagonist Okonkwo of dire consequences if he breaks a serious taboo by killing a child who has lived with him for three years and called him father. It is significant that in a novel about the transition of an ancient society on the threshold of modernity, the author makes use of this cautionary song-tale about traditional values which held the society together for ages. Not only that, the novel also abounds with proverbs, which according to Achebe 'is the palmwine with which words are eaten' and according to Kofi Awonoor, these African elements constitute one of the most significant features of his totally 'African-derived English style'.

Other aspects of African oral tradition like magic and fantasy based on folktales too found expression in novels around 1930s. For example, a novel called *Gandoki* by Muhammadu Bello has been described as 'a reduction of Hausa oral tradition to written literature'. But such simplistic adaptations of folktale or fairy tale materials in the new writing did not survive long, though the tradition continued to find expression in a more 'realistic' way as Thiongo says :

'The magic realism in the Anglo-phone African narrative that runs all the way from Tutuola to Ben Okri comes straight from that which surrounds African orature.'(ibid.)

The architects of this new literary tradition emerging in Africa like Achebe, Thiongo, Soyinka, Okri and many others, while dealing with universal themes like religion, labour, corruption and justice in contemporary situations often employed oral tradition material and techniques to give their writings a distinctively African flavour with overtones of strong nationalistic sentiments.

From North East India too, there is an emerging trend in creative writing which relies heavily on elements from the oral traditions of the region. However, in the case of these writings, there seems to be a subtle conceptual shift. If, in the hands of African writers, oral tradition material became modern metaphors to deal with contemporary social and political issues, the North Eastern Indian writers have gone back to their own cultural roots to articulate their perceptions about themselves in an environment where, more often than not, they find themselves marginalized on the side of 'orality' against the 'written'. Most of them write in English, and those who write originally in their mother-tongues, also have had their works translated into English for obvious reasons. Yumlam Tana, a poet from Arunachal Pradesh explains, in *The Kurta And The Pyjama* [8]

I write in English
Which is not my language
You see, I am a Nyishi
A tribal claiming to be a man.

He continues,
I am all humanity
With no geographical boundary,
No social restrictions, no biological limitations
...Nothing to divide me from my fellow men.

Another North East Indian poet from Meghalaya, Esther Syiem's poem called Ka *Tiew Lalyngi Pepshad* [9] is based on a folktale about a beautiful flower that missed an important dance of all the creatures of the earth because she procrastinated over her toilette. While the name of the flower has become idiomatic in the language to describe a procrastinator, there is an interesting twist to the narration when the flower says,

But if allowed to have my say
I'd arrange the words
and tell them all,

the reason for my procrastination
from the view of one
who wanted most of all
to be the crowning beauty of a dance
which eventually I missed...

Here one sees that the folktale has been transformed through these lines by the poet's imaginative interpellation, thus creating literature of a different kind. Likewise in another poem called *Mylliem*[10], Syiem makes an important statement about her own sense of 'rootedness' to her cultural past.

Mylliem of my ancestors
need I affiliate to you all over again?
as in your men and women
I find an answering call
in the aroma of smoked earth in them
and in the unbeaten slant of a life
that writes itself back into my present.

The present writer's poem called *Stone-People from Lungterok*[11] is another poem which takes her back to the distant past of her origin in an attempt to validate the culture embodied in the oral tradition and also to re-assess the perceptions regarding the so-called oral societies vis-à-vis the written cultures. After describing the salient features of traditional culture, the poet asks a very pertinent question in the end,

Was the birth adult when the stones broke?
Or are the Stone- people yet to come of age?

By incorporating insights from their oral traditions, the North East Indian writers are not only writing orality but also creating a new literature of their own in a language which though not their own, nevertheless lends a kind of universality to the literature. By blending the elements of oral tradition with their creative imagination and synthesizing the past with the present, these writers are exploring an exciting and derivative literature which is both oral and written at

the same time. For example, a poem called *Ren*[12] by Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih is, on the surface an oral story of a fisherman who falls in love with a river nymph and who

left his mother and his home
To live in magic depths
But before he leaves he tells his mother

'Mother', he said,
'listen to the river,
as long as it roars
you will know that I live'

The 'message' in these lines is there would always be a line of communication between mother and son through nature. But this is not to be, because later in the poem we read these lines,

Times have changed
Few care to listen
Many only wish to be left
To their separate dreams

This is obviously a comment on present times where man has lost not only the bond with nature but has also become individualistic, which is the hallmark of modern existence.

By bringing in the sensibilities of their own cultures, these writers are also adding a new dimension to the bulk of literature known as Indian Writing in English, which forms a staple in many University syllabi today. Nagaland University and North-Eastern Hill University, Departments of English have given due recognition to this emerging literature from North Eastern Indian by including the works of some authors in their MA and M.Phil syllabi.

What distinguishes the new literature is that the oral tradition provides the writers with a catalytic framework wherein they are able to explore different regimes of values and their relations to complex social forces and social positioning. By doing this, the 'past ness' of the tradition is re-interpreted in a symbiosis with the present in contemporary terms to create an altogether new 'literature' rich

with indigenous flavour. In this literature, folklore does not remain merely 'folklore' as relics of a distant past but becomes the signifier of a new sensibility. 'Writing orality' in this sense transforms the oral tradition through recollection, inclusion, inversion and re-interpretation. Not only that, 'writing orality'also provides a new artistic and theoretical framework for exploration of ancient oral literatures, which had hitherto been consigned to the realm of the 'primitive' and the 'un-civilized' by anthropologists and historians alike.

Besides providing impetus to creative writers to produce new literature, orality or oral tradition of the region is also helping scholars of different disciplines to articulate and document the ancient philosophies and religions, is providing new theoretical frameworks to look at tribal histories and helping them to re-interpret/re-construct the same in a more holistic way. The most important contribution of orality towards such studies is in the sphere of political insights to traditional village polities, which is providing room for synthesis of modern political concepts within the traditional framework. These writings are in the form of doctoral theses in the Universities of the region, many of which have now been published in books.

The ultimate result of all these various writings is that the people of North East India seem to have attained a new 'maturity' in their perceptions about themselves , that the 'other' of their position vis-à-vis mainland India was not 'them' elsewhere but very much within their own sense of isolation in an oral culture. Once articulated through the written text, similarities of world-views with other cultures have helped forge new affinities, and at the same time enabled them to accept the differences as only uniqueness of any given culture rather than as denominators of any deficiency or inferiority.

In recent years writing orality appears to have caught the imagination of many creative writers of North East India, but one has to take note that it is marked by a spontaneity unrelated to any political agenda as in the African context where orality or 'orature' was consciously employed to arouse nationalistic fervour among the common people against the colonizers. Writing orality in Africa was a deliberate political activity at a crucial juncture in their history, whereas

decades later now in North East India it can be seen more as an exploratory and evolutionary process of identifying relevant metaphors in oral sources to cope with modern predicaments by making creative writing perhaps more 'native' to the natives themselves. In these writings there is no romantic nostalgia for a pristine past as in the works of a number of Native American writers in the early years of the Native American Renaissance. The feature which marks the works of creative writers from North Eastern Indian, especially the poets, who draw inspiration from oral sources is the intricate inter-play of imaginative dialogue with elements from their collective past to produce a literature which is not only relevant to the people of this particular region but is also bound to have universal significance because it deals with common human predicaments.

Viewed from the reverse side however, orality, which Mahapatra calls 'the functional dimension of a written text', sometimes, produces dramatic transformation to it. One example can be taken from an essay by Stuart Blackburn in the book *Many Ramayanas The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia* edited by Paula Richmond[13] in which he describes puppet plays based largely on the epic poem *Iramavataram* by Kampan of Kerala. The particular episode refers to misgivings about war which are never explicitly voiced in the written text. But when the puppeteer sings aloud there is dramatic transformation of the text in the oral version.

Puppet Play	Kampan
'No more war!	'Strong-shouldered Rama looked at
And no more fame!	His bow, at the knots of the
No victory bow!	Snake-weapon,
No wife! No kingdom!	Looked at the still, dark night,
Even Siva who gave me life,	At the gods in heaven
I renounce them all,	And screamed,
If you Lakhsmana,	I'll rip up this earth!'
Do not live'	Then, biting his coral lips, he pondered what wise men said.

In verbalizing the written text, the puppeteers are infusing their own interpretation of the covert feelings expressed in the original text, thus adding a new dimension to the transference from writing to orality. Just as creative writers draw inspiration from the oral tradition and employ these elements in a new form, the Kerala puppeteers, while not totally deviating from the written text, create explicit meanings from the nuances embedded in the source. Thus one can see that the relationship between orality and writing is often one of complementarity and not of any hierarchical disparity.

Unlike the static nature of a written text however, oral literature is dynamic and evolving all the time. Through the very act of writing, orality enters into a phase of this evolution whereby it is not only re-enforced by the re-telling, but also acquires a new significance for the people as a vital link of the present with their past through the art of the writer. This however cannot be interpreted as a mere romanticization or dramatization of the original lore; rather, whereas earlier the lore was considered to be mere oral fables and stories of a by-gone era, in the new 'avatar', which still retains its basic elements, it enters into the realm of 'written literature' and I believe contributes to the expansion of existing 'canon'. Thus oral tradition not only offers avenues for new creativity but also ensures for itself a kind of permanence in a different form and medium. Also, in a certain way writing orality is a process of 'self deconstruction' of a people in search of meanings for their existence by retrieving relevant metaphors from the 'imaginative experience' of orality to deal with present realities.

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