

## REVIEW ARTICLE

### The Text Within - Studies of Oral Ritual Texts in Nepal in the Last Decade Martin Gaenzle

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As a mode of cultural transmission, writing has obvious advantages over oral tradition, and thus the written text tends to be regarded as self-evidently superior to words reproduced from memory. Nevertheless, there have always been grounds to argue the opposite. The Egyptian king in one of Plato's dialogues (Phaidros) rejected the newly invented script as a mode of transmitting knowledge, arguing that it would only weaken man's capacity to memorize. Similarly in contemporary Nepal, shamans value the ability to chant their texts from memory. According to Gurung myth, variants of which are also found among the Kiranti in eastern Nepal, the forefathers did have written texts, but eventually an ancestral shaman ate them; therefore, they recite the text from within and do not rely on written versions like the lamas (Mumford 1989: 53).

Whereas it is well-known that Nepal has a rich tradition of written documents which have been under academic scrutiny since the last century, the remarkably rich oral traditions, not yet recorded in writing, have only fairly recently attracted academic attention. Scientific fieldwork started in the fifties and sixties with a few pioneering studies, primarily in the

field of ethnomusicology. For example, Macdonald and Helffer (1984/1968) contain several references to the materials collected during this period. In the seventies a considerable amount of work on tribal religion, particularly on shamanism appeared, but with few exceptions (Höfer and Shrestha 1973, Hitchcock 1976, Allen 1978, 1979, Sagant 1976) the focus was on institutions and practices rather than on texts.

In the last decade there has been a noticeable shift in the focus of ethnological research: the functionalist approach with its interest in social behaviour, institutions and norms has given way to a more interpretive approach which takes the ideas expressed by people and enshrined in their language as the major focus of investigation. In this review article I shall consider the ways in which Nepalese oral ritual texts have been used, presented and analysed in recent anthropological literature. First I shall take up some books which have included ritual texts to a limited degree, mainly as documentation, illustration and evidence for ethnographic studies with a more general outlook. Then I shall concentrate on works which study oral texts in their own right, as a specific field of investigation. Since Höfer's landmark contribution in 1981 on Tamang ritual texts, this approach has gained increasing importance. However, this new field is yet little explored and there are numerous ways to treat the texts as texts. Therefore my aim is to discuss the different forms the study of oral ritual texts has taken in recent research, and the methodological problems they raise.

#### Instances of texts

When a shaman or tribal priest sings a recital, it is a complex social event in which cultural values and ideas

find expression on many different levels: the singing is accompanied by a performance of symbolic acts, these acts involve various participants with specific social roles (e.g. priest, client, assistant); these roles may be defined through kinship, and/or they may be characterized by distinctions in ritual status and authority, which again may involve the transfer of valuables. Thus a ritual text can only be understood within its multi-layered ethnographic context which requires sound knowledge of the social, cultural and historical background.

Considering the "thickness" of the performative symbolism, a visual description of these events has obvious advantages. Michael Oppitz (1989) has made a strong point for visual anthropology and presented an excellent example of such an approach with his film on Magar shamanism ("Shamans in the Blind Country", 1980). Such a documentary shows the intrinsic interplay of action and speech, the visual and the auditory, in a way which would be impossible in writing. To make up for the disadvantages of the medium of film (its transient nature hinders academic use) Oppitz has also published a book with the film text and photographs (Oppitz 1981), thus finding a compromise between film and writing. As the film and the book contain various passages from ritual texts, Oppitz has for the first time documented the poetry of the Magar shamans in its context of action, thus reminding us that we first have to watch and listen before we start to interpret. In a number of later publications Oppitz has given thorough analyses of the narrative content -- generally abstracted from its ritual form -- of the Magar myths (see particularly Oppitz 1991).

Despite the drawbacks of 'verbal' anthropology, writing allows for a different kind of accuracy. Because ritual practices are so closely linked with indigenous concepts and meaning, a deeper understanding presupposes a more analytical approach to language and its uses. In her study on eastern Tamang Brigitte Steinmann (1987), in the French tradition of Himalayan ethnography, combines detailed description of ordinary social practices, from the most material to the most ideal, with philological scrutiny. In the second half of her book she focusses on the magico-religious domain of ritual action and roles, and eventually achieves an interesting reconstruction of the disappearing world of the bard-like ritual specialist, the *tamba*, who through his orally transmitted texts maintains a pre-Buddhist core of Tamang identity. The last chapter contains a corpus of ritual texts in translation, thus allowing the *tamba* to speak for himself. Unfortunately these chants stand somewhat disconnected from the study which contains few cross-references to this corpus.

Such detailed inventories of local traditions are invaluable and of crucial importance for comparative studies. Alternatively, one can emphasize the more fundamental aspects of a culture and structure one's findings accordingly. David Holmberg in his study of the western Tamang (1989) focuses primarily on general principles and patterns, like exchange, reciprocity, contradiction, mediation, etc. by which the whole of the social order, of which religion is but one part, is characterized. To discern the underlying structures, he abstracts the "total religious field" or system, which he regards as made up of three ritual domains: that of the

Buddhist lamas based on written texts, that of the *lambus* based on sacrifice, and that of the shamans (*bombos*) based on visionary experiences. Holmberg shows how these ritual specialists view their different tasks, how these views often contradict each other, but how, at the same time, they are (at least partly) complementary and form a division of labour. It becomes evident that the three domains also imply different attitudes towards texts (which, rather than a strict division, could also be seen as a continuum): the *lama* uses printed texts, the *lambu* relies on oral texts, which he recites more or less mechanically, the *bombo* speaks "from the stomach". But, except for presenting a few exemplary passages, Holmberg does not venture into a study of texts, and thus the interrelationship of the three forms of discourse remains to be examined.

An entirely synchronic approach, however, is not tenable in the study of Himalayan religions and toward the end of his book Holmberg is more and more led to historical reconstructions of the ritual system. What is only indicated here has been taken up with strong theoretical armour by Stan Royal Mumford (1989): the essentially disharmonious process of historical layering. Rather than viewing the ritual system in Gyasumdo as a balanced whole of complementary functions, Mumford describes the situation as a result of an ongoing dialogue between the Gurung ritual specialists and the Tibetan *lamas*, based on competing claims and interpretations, leading to modifications, concessions and assimilations which never fully erase the trace of the past. In reconstructing this process, Mumford makes fruitful use of the theories of Michail Bakhtin, the

Russian literary critic who has had a growing impact on recent theoretical debate in anthropology. This reorientation marks a shift towards a study of discourse, rather than institutions, and thus Mumford distinguishes different "voices", as manifested in the different genres of texts: the shamanic world is essentially dialogical, governed by a reciprocal relationship with various superhuman beings, whereas the world of the *lamas* tends to be monological, characterized by a full control of afflicting agents through the detached recitation of the written text. By describing how these voices continue to interact and engage in arguments and counterarguments, Mumford gives a vivid account of cultural processes which tend to be "frozen" in structuralist ethnographies. This novel attempt to write a "double ethnography" (studying two groups instead of one), has, however, its difficulties. Mumford is bound to be criticized by tibetologists for not being exhaustive enough. And indeed (speaking from the anthropological side), his description of Gurung traditions is somewhat sketchy and piecemeal, mainly -- it seems -- relying on commentaries and summaries of texts rather than on the texts themselves (though he could have relied on ethnographic material such as Strickland's). Nevertheless, further studies of such "dialogues" (including that brought about by the ethnographer) are needed in Himalayan anthropology, as is the dialogue between anthropologists and tibetologists.

The books discussed so far all indicate the importance of oral ritual texts as meaningful expressions of cultural values, and as a medium for the perpetuation of traditional ideas. However, they do not intend to make these texts

the object of their analysis. Though texts, or mostly short passages of the texts or summaries, are presented, they are either uncommented documents or isolated samples of ritual language, serving to illustrate the ethnographic description or to support a certain argument as evidence. As the context out of which the passages are taken is not always made clear, the value of the evidence cannot easily be checked.

#### Texts as texts, and their relation to ritual

In his study of Tamang ritual texts, Höfer (1981) suggested an approach to oral texts which imitates the philologist's approach to written texts. The reasons he cites mainly stem from a skepticism towards "structural" studies which ignore individual variations in interpretation and construe a Whole of commonly shared beliefs. Thus, rather than attempting to construct "totalizing" models of religious ideas, Höfer turns to the source: he presents, after short introductions into the settings, whole ritual texts which he translates and annotates with linguistic commentaries. In this way the reader is in a position to sense the openness of semantic fields, and rather than being offered a pre-fabricated interpretation which explains everything, he is forced to interpret for himself.

Oral ritual texts have a peculiar status: though they exist only in the form of speech they also have qualities of written texts. To use distinctions suggested by Ricoeur (1971) writing fixes or inscribes speech events, and it dissolves it from the subjective intention of the speaker as well as the contingencies of a particular situation. The same applies - to a limited degree - to oral ritual texts: they are transmitted

from generation to generation as essentially the same texts (though variation does exist), there is no single author (rather a multitude of unknown ones), and through the repetitive nature of the ritual speech event it loses its contingent character. These qualities justify treating oral ritual texts with the same respect and a similar methodology as written texts. In both cases "the text's career escapes the finite horizon lived by the author" (Ricoeur 1971: 534).

Few scholars of the anthropology of Nepal have ventured in the direction indicated here, and the two major studies that have been carried out so far (that of Simon Strickland and Gregory Maskarinec) are unpublished. Therefore it seems worthwhile to introduce these works and to discuss them, even though it is unusual to do so in a review article.

Simon Strickland has studied the Gurung of central Nepal. In his doctoral dissertation entitled *Belief, Practices, and Legends: a Study in the Narrative Poetry of the Gurungs of Nepal* (1982a) Strickland analyses in detail some *pé* recitations and the ritual language which is used. As the corpus of *pé* is extensive, Strickland focuses on some general issues which relate to the linguistic - or poetic - characteristics and cultural content of ritual texts in Gurung society. In a case study comparing three versions of one particular text (the *pé* of Sirkulami) the author demonstrates the remarkably high stability of the narrative chants: about 85% of the lines of one textual version recur in identical or similar form in the version of another performer (this analysis has been separately published; see Strickland 1983). Having thus established the relatively fixed nature of the texts, which indicates a high degree of trans-

generational identity (but leaving little room for creativity), Strickland goes on to explore the social meaning of the texts, showing that the *pé* in their archaic language express certain conceptual patterns which seem to belong to a cultural substratum of a "civilisation de l'Himalaya" (a term borrowed from A.W. Macdonald). The legends, it is argued in detail, make specific links between, for example, creative dismemberment and the patrilineal transmission of knowledge, between the duality of the monsoon cycle and the system of symmetrical alliance, between journeys in the vertical line and the curing of illness caused by soul-theft, etc. Rather than treating the myths as direct expressions or representations of a particular social reality, Strickland focuses more on their comparative dimension, showing how particular concepts are related to similar ones among other Tibeto-Burman groups (e.g., he demonstrates striking similarities even with Rai myths).

A particularly fascinating side of Strickland's study is the analysis of ritual language (see also Strickland 1987). This form of speech, which is quite distinct from ordinary language, is characterized by the recurrence of various forms of parallelisms: mainly paired terms (binomials), paired phrases within metrical lines, and paired phrases between metrical lines. It is shown how the formal possibilities of ritual language account for the semantic richness and aesthetic quality of the chants -- something which is almost impossible to convey in a translation. For example, the pairing of *tō* (village territory, village deity) and *shyo* (stream) evokes an image of the village, which can only be understood if

one knows the complex semantic fields of these opposed terms. The combination of terms is more than simply the addition of two concepts: it requires the creative construction of a more global meaning. Here, the advantage of textual studies becomes evident: only such a micro-analysis of the ritual chants reveals their immanent poetic potential. In a recent article Hofer has further explored this kind of approach (see Hofer, forthcoming)

How do oral texts relate to ritual practices? It is mainly in the fourth chapter that Strickland partially discusses concrete rituals and relates them to the texts. Here he is primarily concerned with the recurring images of the ritual journeys and the presentations involved, which he compares, developing a typology that can be applied to other ethnographic contexts as well. Distinguishing between reciprocated and unreciprocated journeys, for instance, he points to analogies in the system of matrimonial prestations. The problem of the interrelationship between the chants and ritual action is taken up more explicitly in the final chapter (see also Strickland 1982b). Applying the speech act theory developed by Austin and Searle, Strickland takes up Ahern's distinction between weak and strong illocutionary acts: narrative *pé* belonging to the former, chants that directly accompany magic, acts fall into the latter category. This allows a kind of classification of the numerous *pé* along this continuum, but, as the author notes, "One can imagine how each type -- the narrative and the practical -- might become the other over time and across cultural boundaries" (Strickland 1982b: 56). This turn towards a pragmatic perspective clarifies, it seems to me, certain issues which

the author raised in the beginning of the study in respect of belief. Strickland elaborates at some length the point that belief is a heterogeneous and sometimes obscure phenomenon, as not everybody believes the same things. But if one regards the ritual chants not so much as propositions about the world (which can be true or false), but as modes of action which are not representative but formative of reality, then the question of belief appears less problematic. As Strickland himself observes, it is a difference whether someone discusses his belief -- for example in the existence of a 'soul' -- in abstract, or when involved in ritual action. The remark of a young informant: "When we worship... we believe (but not at other times)" poignantly expresses the power of ritual performances (Strickland 1982a: 18). They construct a reality that is either self-evident or else rejected as a whole.

Thus the recitation and enactment of *pé* narratives "opens up" -- to use the phrasing of Ricoeur -- "a world" (which for him, however, is a characteristic of written texts, see Ricoeur 1971: 535f.). Discussing the complex concept of *péda-luda* (related to Tib. *dpe* and translatable as 'example word principle word'), Strickland points out that the narrative chants to which this expression refers provide 'precedents' or 'examples' of action from the mythic past, though he emphasizes that they may not be seen as morally injunctive (at least if taken literally). Like the *muddum* or *mundhum* of the Rai and Limbu (with which the concept has much in common, cf. Gaenszle 1991: 246), the oral tradition of the *pé* keeps the memory of ancestral deeds alive and by thus ritually linking the present with the past, a particular way of life, Lebenswelt, is continuously re-created.

That ritual narratives are not simply obscure, half-understood, inconsequential stories with little more than aesthetic value is strongly argued by Gregory Maskarinec in his study of *Jhākris* (mostly *Kāmī*) in Jājarkot. In his dissertation entitled *The Rulings of the Night: An Ethnographic Exegesis of Shamanistic Oral Texts From Western Nepal* (1990a) Maskarinec demonstrates that shamanic recitals as well as mantras, far from being incomprehensible, are "artfully constructed" (1990a: 218), profoundly meaningful and well-preserved oral texts. Drawing upon various philosophical and theoretical approaches, especially ordinary language philosophy, ethnomethodology and pragmatism, he proposes to study these texts not as expressing or representing some hidden reality (be it "subjective" or "objective"), but as constituting a meaningful world within the texts themselves, thus constructing what he calls a "discursive space" (Maskarinec 1990a: 5, 29).

Therefore, rather than proposing totalizing models of the shamanic universe, Maskarinec lets the texts speak for themselves, so that the interpretation may "emerge from the description", without claiming to be exhaustive. For example, when discussing the difference between *jhākris* (shamans) and *dhāmis* (mediums) or the etiology of afflictions, the author cites relevant passages of texts in which the shaman himself deals with these issues. (The original Nepali texts are all given in Devanāgarī script in the appendix.) Thus, the reader, instead of being offered the "objective" meaning of certain problematic terms, gets acquainted with their use as part of the shamanic "language games". To give an example: according to the texts, the 84

*vāi* resulted from the witches who danced different dances when they became subdued, and the illnesses which they inflict are related to these dances. Though the etiology, as defined in the texts, may be at odds with 'popular knowledge', the latter is disregarded as 'superstition' by the shaman, thus "upholding the text's version as accurate" (Maskarinec 1990a: 98).

In line with his pragmatic approach Maskarinec puts much emphasis on the interrelationship of shamanic speech and shamanic action. The texts are related in various ways to the rituals: they may be descriptions of the ideal performance (ch. VI), or they may be outright "stage directions" (ch. VII); though, as the author stresses, text and action are not always linked synchronically, rather they follow "parallel but separate courses" (Maskarinec 1990a: 122). As a case study, one particular ritual sequence is examined: the summoning of the *siyo* spirit, which culminates in the spirit's arrival as announced by a chicken's fluttering. In this example, similar forms of which are also discussed by Strickland and documented by Oppitz, the problem of ritual dramas is particularly evident: though the performance is patterned by the text, the text may also be modified according to the course of events. This "reflexivity" - in the sense of Garfinkel's ethnomethodology - (Maskarinec 1990a: 128), which is characteristic of spoken rather than written discourse, accounts for a limited degree of spontaneity and makes possible a creative use of the tradition.

The interrelationship of speech and action is especially close in the case of shamanic *mantras* (here called *mantar*). This little studied and often neglected genre of shamanic speech is

well elucidated in Maskarinec's chapter on "the world as sound" (he has written an article on the subject under the same title, Maskarinec 1990b). Here he convincingly demonstrates that though *mantars* are usually muttered in undertones, they have openings, narrate, etc. What makes them effective, moreover, is their perlocutionary force. Though Maskarinec does not elaborate the point, it is clear that he regards the *mantars* not only as particularly "strong" illocutionary speech acts, but as utterances that bring about the intended effect (the spirits are not only requested to be present, they are actually compelled into attendance).

In studying the features of ritual speech, Maskarinec juggles with pieces of oral texts which he uses as movable blocks, not unlike - it seems - the shamans themselves. But the passages are often aligned according to the author's arguments i.e.: not as in the performance of a particular rite. This kind of "cut up" technique, though methodologically legitimate, is sometimes confusing: it is not always clear whether the presented text is complete or something has been left out (sometimes longer passages are given in the appendix). What Maskarinec attempts is a portrait of a shaman through his knowledge of texts, which, as they can be used in various contexts, may be decontextualized. The problem, however, is: how are the texts interrelated? Is there a specific order underlying the multiple use of the texts? And, if there is something like a shamanic universe, how does it relate to the society as a whole? It is mainly in the two chapters towards the end of the study which deal with the initiation and death ceremonies of the shaman, that these questions are touched upon. Here

the analysis brings out more general concepts like the three-layered cosmos, or the intermediary social role of the shaman.

In her recently published book on Magar shamanism, *Je suis né de vos jeux de tambours*, to which the Jārkoti tradition is surprisingly similar, Anne de Sales has chosen a different approach: the first part ("rituel et société") serves to situate the shamanic tradition within the total cultural setting and deals with the relationships with "nature" and its associated spirits and deities, the sub-clan migrations and the kinship system of generalized exchange, and the annual cycle of village and household rites. In the major (second) part, entitled "gestes et paroles", rather than attempting an exhaustive account of shamanic textual knowledge, she takes the description of one particular healing session as a starting point and then focuses mainly on the narrative chants which she analyses in their totality. The chants are summarized by the author, but publication of the original texts with translations is planned in a separate volume (*Etudes mongoles et sibériennes*, numéro spécial, forthcoming). Thus the book stands somewhere in between a pure textual study and a more conventional ethnographic account of institutions. But as the "littérature rituelle" -- as she calls it -- clearly is in the centre of the book and is treated as such in novel ways, I will concentrate on it here.

As the title of the second part suggests, a major concern is the interrelationship of ritual acts and ritual chants. A close correspondence is evident in the chants relating to the shamanic accessories ("chants d'accessoires") to which I shall return shortly.

In the case of the narrative chants, however, the relationship is more complex. The chants may be outright prescriptions (or what Maskarinec calls "stage directions"), as in the actualisation of the mythical pact with the witches through offerings in the séance. Or they may be what the author calls "sous-titrage" ("subtitling") whereby a ritual activity (e.g. the bringing up of the patient's soul from the underworld by the shaman) is synchronized with the narrative (the bringing up of Biselme from the underworld by her brother-in-law). Nevertheless, this kind of more or less direct correspondence seems to concern only a relatively small portion of the narrative chants, and it is emphasized that the symbolic acts may be easily understood by lay persons with only a rudimentary knowledge of the stories. Therefore the ritual dramatization and the corpus of myths are treated separately in the analysis.

But the interpretation of the narratives in their totality reveals a correspondence between act and speech at another, "deeper" level. In what may be described as a modified structural approach, it is first demonstrated that the myths contain a series of binary oppositions, often homologous, such as male/female, elder/younger, dry/wet, man/spirit, etc. But in addition to being regarded as constituting a mythic universe, the narratives are shown to have a dynamic dimension: they effect, what the author calls "structural movements". When, for example, the pact of Gorho -- ancestor of man -- and his younger brother Separan -- ancestor of the spirit world -- is renewed by their descendants one generation later, this is not simply a redundancy. Rather, it may be seen as evoking a passage from one level to another, from a primeval

founding act to a more recent and more differentiated ancestral past of which the present ritual activity is only a repetitive continuation. This kind of reduplication in time, which recurs in all the myths and likewise in ritual action (putting them in a relation of isomorphism) helps to explain the peculiar link between the chants and their enactment, which the author calls "anchorage".

This concept of "anchorage" is central to the last chapter in which the chants with predominantly non-narrative content are examined as "chants d'anchorage". Though also in the interpretation of myths de Sales often makes use of certain concepts developed by literary criticism, her kind of "poetological" approach which treats the chants as literary texts becomes most evident -- and most fruitful -- in this part of the book. Examining chants which variously deal with ritual accessories, the opening of the séance and the ritual journeys, the author focuses on the particularly strong "singularisation" (or what also could be called contextualization) of shamanic speech. As the analysis of the ritual phrasings shows, various rhetorical or poetical devices are employed (e.g. use of performatives, switches in the use of personal pronouns and time, serializing of metonymic expressions, listing of proper names etc.) which reduce the generalizing function of language and closely link the chanted words with the ritual situation and activity. Through this unique and often unconventional use of language, the shaman creates a ritual universe, or "espace rituelle", which is at the root of the more complex ordinary reality, and of which he alone is the master.

Thus, in a kind of hermeneutical circle, de Sales proceeds from a holistic,

structural interpretation of myth to a detailed analysis of the smallest linguistic entities and back again to an encompassing model of the shamanic universe. This universe appears as a world in itself, intimately linked with the social organisation of the Magar. Still one often wonders: how closed has this world been to the outside? Have the influences from the south, as evidenced in the high percentage of Nepali words in the ritual language, really had only an "ornamental" effect (de Sales 1991: 27)? There is no doubt about the essentially "bodhic" features of this tradition, but considering the often very similar stories reported by Maskarinec from Kāmī or other "Ḍum" shamans further west (cf. the association of the first shaman with "Tik(h)u Kāmī", conflict and competition with the king) one is led to assume that also in this region some kind of Himalayan dialogue -- not necessarily a symmetrical one -- may have taken place, which still remains to be reconstructed through comparative studies.

### Conclusion

Looking at these various approaches to the study of oral ritual texts, the following observations can be made.

All the authors agree that the texts are an important key to the understanding of the indigenous cosmologies. While most monographs tend to treat the texts as expressions of religious institutions and therefore mainly deal with the latter, the studies focusing on the texts as such rather reverse the emphasis: the texts are seen as the major vehicle of the religious tradition and, as such, are constitutive of social reality. Especially Maskarinec (1990a: 17ff.) argues strongly for such a "lingu-

istic turn". Interestingly, his concept of discursive space, which is constructed through the texts, has much in common with de Sales' "espace rituelle" or "univers rituel" (1991: 276, 300, 306f.) which is likewise a result of the performance of oral literature.

If there is a differing assessment about the role of the texts in the present, there seems to be a general agreement that they can be regarded as a valuable source for historical reconstruction, being treated rather like "archaeological monuments" (Maskarinec 1990a: 216). Especially the study of ritual languages reveals "archaisms" which reflect conceptual structures that may no longer be relevant. As Strickland demonstrates, there is a large and yet little explored field for comparative studies, and this -- it may be added -- will have to entail interdisciplinary collaboration.

The textual studies all devote much attention to the interrelationship of text and action. It is generally agreed that though there is a close link (homologies, "stage directions", performative speech acts), the two levels are also analytically distinct. The logic of ritual speech (especially of narrative) and that of symbolic action are different. Despite their correspondence, they are largely independent codes. But, as de Sales in particular emphasizes, it is precisely the link, the "anchoring" relation, between the chants projecting a past and the acts in the present, which makes the shamanic session effective.

It is significant that all the textual studies at some stage refer to speech act theory which was first developed in philosophical writing but has also had a considerable impact in anthropology. Obviously ritual speech has not only a referential function, representing a

somehow pre-existent reality. It quite often is formative, creating facts, defining social institutions, interacting with an invisible addressee which the shaman attempts to control. This kind of indexicality is clearly a characteristic of spoken discourse. Ricoeur (1971: 535) calls it "ostensive reference", but as our examples show, the illocutionary or perlocutionary speech acts (like the mantra) have nevertheless the quality of texts.

Finally it becomes apparent that an approach which takes the texts as "artfully constructed" phenomena (Maskarinec) also leads to the application of concepts borrowed from literary criticism. The texts are seen as making use of rhetorical figures (metaphors, metonymies, synecdoches etc.) and poetic techniques (e.g. alliteration, reduplication and parallelism). It is no coincidence that inspiration is drawn from Russian Formalism (de Sales, Strickland) and the writings of Bakhtin (Mumford, de Sales). Oral texts are literary products without an author (cf. Foucault's well-known remarks on authorship).

To sum up, let me stress again why it is not only academically rewarding but also highly necessary to pursue textual studies along the lines sketched above. Diverse as the approaches may be at first sight, they all seem to point in a similar direction (sometimes only differing terminologies are used to describe the same issue). So, rather than favouring one methodology over the other, I would suggest to treat them as complementary. Oral texts, I tried to show, are valuable documents which deserve to be studied in their own right, and there is no reason why this should not be done in different ways. As the number of those who still carry the texts

"within" is fast diminishing, the task to record these fading traditions in the field is urgent. But just as necessary is an adequate publication of the texts. Publication policies in different national contexts, are not always favourable to such editions, so one must ask how far market constraints should be allowed to affect academic studies. Moreover, there is also an ethical question: do we not owe it to the people, whose culture we describe, that we treat their traditions with respect and keep their texts as complete as possible, rather than make them fit our arguments?

Numerous questions remain open. What is the best way of presenting the texts (interlineary translation versus separate and "free" translation)? How should "inspirational" texts with a low degree of stability be dealt with? Is it better to rely on dictated versions than on chanted ones, and how do they compare? And how can a regional perspective be developed which looks beyond the boundary of one group? I do not think it is necessary to find a definite answer to these questions, as the methodologies may be fitted to each particular case. The questions only indicate that the topos is beginning to be explored and that much remains to be done, though it is already getting late.

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