

# Oral Poetry

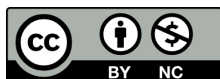
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Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Poetry*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2025,  
<https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0428>

This is a revised and enlarged edition based on two previous editions of *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance and Social Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977 and Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992).

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ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80511-409-3

ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80511-410-9

ISBN PDF: 978-1-80511-411-6

ISBN HTML: 978-1-80511-413-0

ISBN EPUB: 978-1-80511-412-3

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0428

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Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

# Concluding comment

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I have no general theoretical conclusion to present as conclusion to this book. The aim has been to provide a short guide to the study of oral poetry and its controversies, and not to set up a model of my own. Nevertheless there are some remarks to make briefly in this concluding comment.

First, a main point in this discussion has been the denial of a clear-cut differentiation between oral and written literature. Throughout the book I have rejected the suggestion that there is something peculiar to 'oral poetry' which radically distinguishes it from written poetry in nature, composition, style, social context or function. This may seem a very negative conclusion. It may also appear perverse that, while rejecting the concept of 'oral poetry' as an entirely separate category, I should nonetheless have chosen to write a book about it: and then spent much of it explaining away my title.

But the position is not totally self-contradictory or negative. The rejection of errors—or what seem to me errors—can have its uses; and dubious generalisations about 'oral poetry' have long held sway. To bring some doubts into the open is essential as part of the search after truth and also to combat the idea, still prevalent, that there is some deep and fundamental chasm between those of us who are 'modern', industrial and literate and the supposedly far-different world of non-literate, 'traditional' or 'developing' peoples. Getting rid of this particular model of literature—and of society—will help us, I believe, to understand the continued strength of oral poetry in a world which (for that matter) still contains much illiteracy, and also to recognise its appearance even in the most highly 'literate' and industrial settings as a normal and valued manifestation of human artistic expression and activity.

And then, the suggestion that the oral/written distinction, so far as it exists, is more like a continuum (or perhaps a complex set of continuums)

than a sharp break between two separate categories does not mean that it is foolish to concentrate on one end of this continuum rather than the other. In practice, poetry which falls towards the oral end has often been neglected in studies of literature, and a comparative book primarily devoted to the topic is certainly overdue. It is not a contradiction to focus on this aspect, while at the same time insisting that there is no sharp and absolute break between oral and written forms of poetry.

There is much to learn from concentration on the oral side of poetry. In particular, the element of *performance*, of oral presentation, is of such obvious and leading significance in oral poetry that, paradoxically, it raises the question whether this element is not also of more real importance in the literature we classify as 'written' than we often realise. Is there not an auditory ring in most poetry? is reading aloud, declaiming aloud, not in practice an important part of our culture? how many people only appreciate poetry through the *eye*? is 'literature' not something more than a visually apprehended text? I suggest that something can be learned about written literature by considering the 'oral performance' element in oral poetry.

Although I am not trying to put forward one model of 'society' or of 'literature' in this book, I have to admit that whether through the findings of the subject itself or from my own preconceptions in studying it, the picture that I derive from this study of oral poetry is of man as an active, imaginative and thinking being—and not as the product of 'social structure', the arena for unconscious urges, or the result of deep cognitive and symbolic mental structures which are in a sense beyond his power to affect. Literature is, and expresses, people doing things, and making choices. It is not the blind result of superorganic laws—those of 'oral style' or 'oral tradition' or whatever—which predetermine people's activities or operate only at the abstract level of some impersonal 'social function' or 'reflection of society'. It was an individual—not an unthinking social force or literary law—who chose to use poetry to mourn her husband killed in the building of the Great Wall of China, and it is other individuals who chose to repeat it:

With flowers blooming and birds singing,  
 Spring is here calling us to visit friends far and near.  
 Other women are accompanied by their husbands and sons,  
 Poor me, I shall go to the wall where my husband's bones bear.



Great Wall! Great Wall! If you can save us from enemies,  
Why not save first our dear ones?

(Wang in Dundes, 1965, p. 311)

If literature is essentially people acting, it does not follow that we look for the a-social and untrammelled poet, outside and beyond society, or that we must follow the romantic theorists in interpreting poetry as something belonging to 'nature' as opposed to 'society', the product of free and unconscious 'natural' impulses. For in poetic institutions as in any other, people act within a social context, following the social conventions that they both use and create.

'People doing things' does not just refer to the outward and observable acts by which people organise poetic activity or use poetry to achieve political power, economic reward and cooperation, religious satisfaction, aesthetic pleasure—or the other roles already mentioned. There is also a sense in which they use it to 'create' the world around them. Poets and performers of lament songs or praise poems create and re-order the situation through their poetic expression, just as Texas prisoners transformed their environment by their songs. The imagery and symbolism in poetry and the whole view of the world conveyed there mediates peoples' experience of that world—creates it according to its own image. For the people involved, the nature of the world *is* what they create and picture it to be in their poetry. For the Hawaiians, their perception of the world around them is partly created by poetic images like that of Hawaii as 'the cluster of islands floating on the sea' just as for the Gilbertese islanders part of the essence of chiefship is created as well as expressed in their song

That man came shouting, 'I am a chief.'  
Certainly he looks lazy enough for the title;  
He also has the appetite of a king's son,  
And a very royal waddle.  
But he shouts, 'I am a chief';  
Therefore I know he is not one.

(Grimble, 1957, p. 206)

Similarly the Ibo poet's and listener's experience of beauty—and of the place of women and of love and of the beauties of nature and many

other things—is in part shaped and created by poems like the *Praise of a beautiful lady* translated by Romanus Egudu.

Young lady, you are:  
 A mirror that must not go out in the sun  
 A child that must not be touched by dew  
 One that is dressed up in hair  
 A lamp with which people find their way  
 Moon that shines bright  
 An eagle feather worn by a husband  
 A straight line drawn by God.

(Egudu and Nwoga, 1973, p. 20)

Here again, what is involved is not the passive repetition of externally determined words—artistic or ritual or utilitarian or whatever—but people actively moulding the world around them: the world of symbols which, ultimately, constitutes the world we experience and live in. It is through poetry—not exclusively, certainly, but surely pre-eminently—that people create and recreate that world.

This view of man—and this particular emphasis in sociological analysis—is not *forced* upon one by the study of poetry; even though it is a subject which does, I hold, tend to incline one to that approach. What is certain, however, is that to ignore the existence of this huge wealth of oral poetry throughout the world, in the present as well as the past, is to miss one of the great sources and products of man's imaginative and reflecting and dramatic faculties—of those things which mark him out as a human and a social animal. If this very preliminary introduction leads anyone on to study particular instances of oral poetry in more depth, or even to notice the oral poetry and literary activity around him with more understanding—then this book will have served its purpose.