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Introduction; or, Why the Comparativist Should Take Account of the South Pacific

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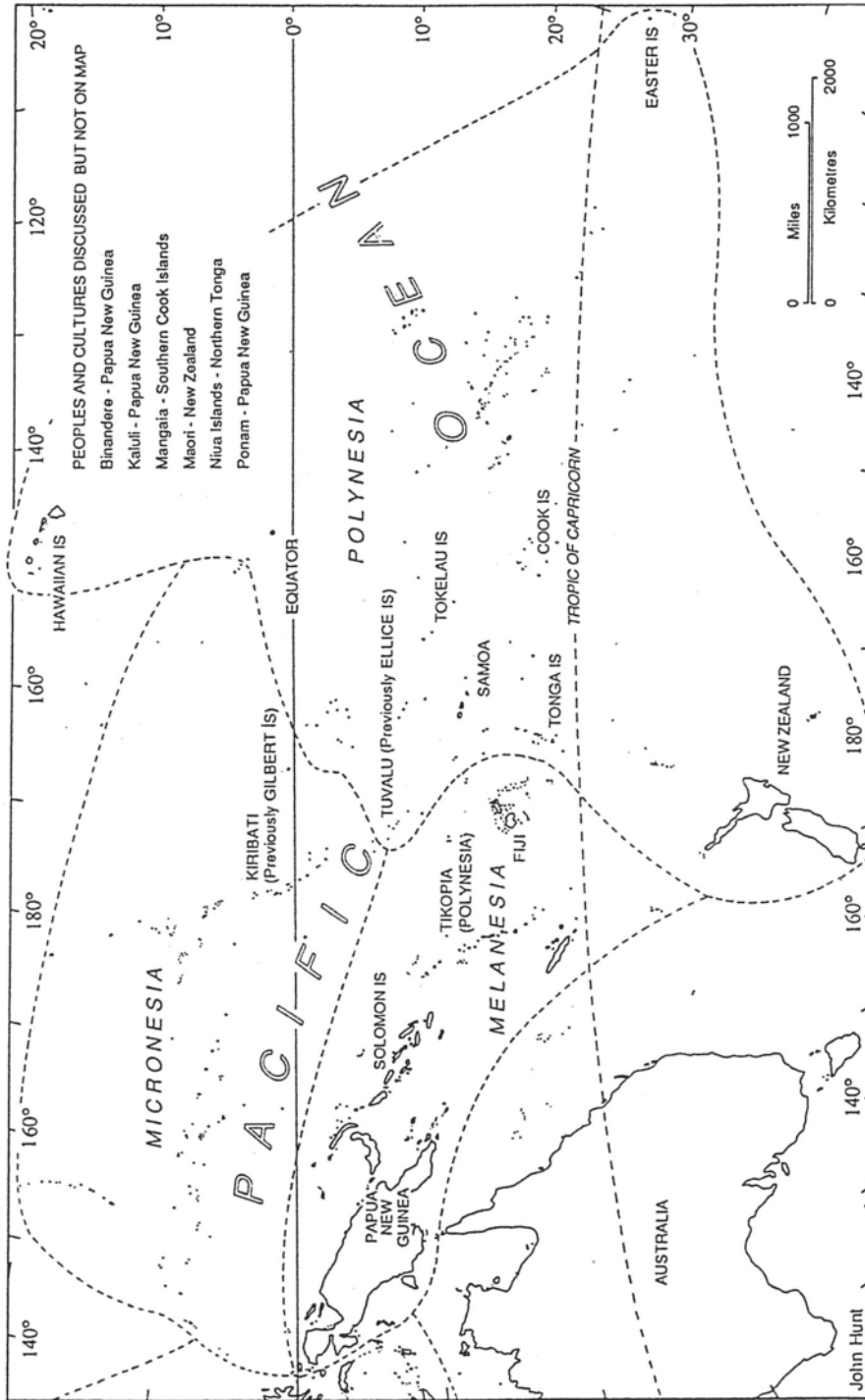
This issue of *Oral Tradition* is devoted to oral traditions in the South Pacific and reports the results of a series of twentieth-century and mainly field-based studies. Since this region may be unfamiliar to some readers, these opening comments give a very brief introduction to this vast area, followed by some discussion of the significance of its oral traditions and their study for the wider comparative study of oral tradition.¹

The Cultural Background and Central Theoretical Issues

The scattered islands and land masses within the huge Pacific Ocean make up a fascinating and too little known portion of the globe—and of our human culture. It is one that, with its evocation of the noble savage and the life of nature, has for long had a romantic appeal for Westerners. But despite this (or even perhaps because of it?), the international scholarly literature outside the Pacific has taken surprisingly little account of the study of Pacific cultural forms. In particular, informed references to Pacific oral tradition are rare in comparative literary analyses or in theories of oral literature and tradition.

This relative neglect of the Pacific in the comparative literature is both unfortunate and paradoxical, for as will become clear from the papers that follow this region is rich in oral literature and tradition. There is a great deal already available in the voluminous collections—both published

¹ Although I am responsible for this Introduction (and therefore for all its deficiencies), I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Margaret Orbell both for all her constructive suggestions and for saving me from many errors, also for her valuable comments reproduced in the next note.



and archival—which resulted from the long tradition of scholarship in the Pacific² and yet more is, like many of the examples in this volume, known from more recent field studies. In the form of spoken narratives, of chorally performed and often danced songs and dramas, and of emotive and wept laments transmitting the sorrow of individuals, these—and other—oral formulations from the Pacific are interesting and often moving in their own right, deserving to take their place among the world’s treasury of literature and tradition. In addition, these traditions manifest important features for the scholar, not least because of their exemplification of a living tradition, often still open to study by field researchers. These features are of the greatest potential interest for comparative research on oral literature and tradition, and yet for the most part are relatively little noticed by non-Pacific specialists.

The cultures of the South Pacific are usually divided into Polynesian and Melanesian (still commonly used, if in the last analysis somewhat inexact, terms), each category represented by several papers in this

² In fact, as comes out particularly clearly in Margaret Orbell’s analysis of the earlier Maori *waiata* songs, there are huge collections, both published and unpublished, of nineteenth-century Maori and other Pacific texts. As she comments more generally (personal communication), one of the noteworthy points about the history of scholarship in the South Pacific is “the existence, especially in Polynesia, of voluminous early collections of texts and historical records, and the potential significance also of this material for comparative research—for example, I hope my article may do something to show that it is possible to contribute to general, theoretical issues by drawing upon this material (*which is so much more extensive and comprehensive, as regards social contexts as well as texts, than that which is available to, for example, the students of the earliest, orally composed, European literatures*). In some parts of Polynesia, most especially New Zealand, Hawaii, and the Societies, there have been for a good 150 years very considerable local traditions of (written) scholarship in this field—these have had varied fortunes, but they have *existed*, the continuity has been there, just as, for example, there have been continuous traditions of scholarship in Irish, Finnish, English (etc.) folklore/oral tradition. My work in New Zealand, and John Charlot’s in Hawaii, are among the contemporary manifestations of these local traditions. Hopefully we are more aware of the comparative dimension, and international scholarship in this field, than some of our predecessors (although the work of such early writers as Fornander, Emerson, Krämer, Gifford, Collocott, Te Uira Henry, Gill, Smith, Best, Taylor, Grey, Wohlers, Ngata, and Te Hurinui was the product, in its time, of formidable scholarship: they were very aware of their European contemporaries and did, in their own styles, interpret and analyze as well as collect; in fact, they could hardly have collected so widely if they had not done so). Of course, different questions now need to be asked and also a greater rigor brought to the kind of things that they did do. But it is important to note the resources in the valuable written records which do already exist, and which contain material which provides opportunities for further research (as do early books on, say, Celtic tradition).”

volume³ (see map opposite). In very general terms, it can be said that Polynesia is characterized by its closely linked set of languages (some nearly mutually intelligible) and its tradition of chiefly and hierarchical rule, whereas Melanesian societies are more heterogeneous both linguistically and socially, usually with a more egalitarian and individualistic ethic and social structure. Not that these generalities correctly sum up all the specifics of each of these many cultures, or indeed dictate the thought patterns and artistic expressions of individuals within them in any simple way; as appears in Wendy Pond's paper, for example, a hierarchical and apparently tradition-bound Polynesian culture may offer all the more incentive for individual and poetic voices to enunciate a differing viewpoint through the "safe" medium of art. However, even for the unexpected ways in which people can manipulate the cultural patterns, some knowledge of this general background as well as of the specificities of each culture is helpful for appreciating the nature and use of these traditions.

These are small-scale cultures. Apart from the Maori on the "mainland" of New Zealand, most island populations are extremely small, often separated from their neighbors by many hundreds of miles of ocean. Even independent nation-states within the Pacific, for example Kiribati (the previously named Gilbert Islands) or the Cook Islands, sometimes contain only a few thousand people in all—hence their appropriate designation by political scientists as "micro-states." It has to be remembered too that most of these nations consist of archipelagoes rather than single islands, adding yet more to the small-scale and remote existence of the dispersed islands. Papua New Guinea provides a larger land mass, but there too there have been physical and cultural barriers to travel and the size of the traditional communities was very small; thus the Melanesian Kaluli, Binandere, or Ponam whose oral traditions are discussed here number only a few thousands or less each.

In one way Pacific life and culture has thus been isolated and independent, but in another way their traditional seafaring skills and, in recent times, their use of modern transport opportunities has led to interaction and mutual contact, especially among the closely cognate Polynesian languages (the Tokelauan poet Ihaia Puka described by Thomas and Tuia, for example, can and does compose in three languages). There have also been continuing interactions with other areas around the Pacific and—for two centuries or so for Polynesia, from earlier this century for the interior of Papua New Guinea—with Europe. This history of contact

³ The small islands making up what is usually called Micronesia to the north do not, as it happens, appear directly in this collection, although the Tokelau poet Ihaia described in "Profile of a Composer" has close connections with Kiribati culture through his foster mother.

has been varied, although it usually included some form or another of colonial experience (in most cases now constitutionally in the past)⁴ with perhaps the single most important aspect of that history being the influence of the Christian church on—indeed in some senses incorporation into— earlier and contemporary Pacific culture. As will become clear in the later papers, these interactions are reflected and exploited in local oral arts, for which they form part of the background and context.

Although each paper stands independently and the authors represent a number of different disciplines (anthropology, ethnomusicology, folklore, literature, history) as well as different personal backgrounds, there is one important characteristic shared among the studies in this issue: they are by authors who live or have carried out long-term fieldwork in the areas of the South Pacific that they describe. This already makes this collection of interest through its presentation of new empirical material—in itself both intriguing and enjoyable—by scholars steeped in the traditions of an important area of the world which is as yet too little known outside the Pacific itself. But it is also worth commenting on two more theoretical implications of the mainly contemporary, local, and field-based nature of the papers here.

First, unlike many earlier accounts and collections of “oral traditions” from non-literate or colonized peoples, the discussions here are not the outcome of brief forays into the “field” by foreign collectors from a self-styled “superior” culture, concerned only to complete some rapid recording then get back to their capitals with their hoards: to be regarded as a collection of museum “specimens,” as it were, from a radically different and probably somewhat despised stratum of society—at best one to be condescended to. The research reported here, by contrast, no doubt reflecting wider changes in both intellectual concerns and political realities, arises rather from long and intensive local interaction either by scholars themselves living in the region or through research visits continuing through many years of friendship and contact. In several cases the authorship is a joint one, combining the insights of academic researcher and local native-speaking scholar (in the case of John Waiko with both roles united in the same person). It is clear not only from the explicit salutation at the outset of Wendy Pond’s paper (“I ask leave from the poets and orators of Tonga. . .”) but also from the comments and acknowledgments in paper after paper that scholars now, far more than in the past, are rightly conscious that the subjects they seek to communicate and analyze are owned neither by the researchers nor by some outside

⁴ Hence the changed names in recent years of several of the countries mentioned here. The unfamiliar reader may wish to know that these include Kiribati (old name Gilbert Islands), Tuvalu (Ellice Islands), and Vanuatu (New Hebrides); most other names have remained the same or near enough to recognize.

academic community but represent the authentic voices of people and cultures rich in their own dignity and achievements.

One corollary of this more “equal” and humane approach is a much greater appreciation than in many earlier studies of the aesthetic and (often) personally creative quality of these oral forms. No longer can they be assumed to be the generalized passive products of some far-away or long-ago stage in society (a lesson for some historians too here, perhaps?), but rather can be seen for what they indeed often are: the living processes through which thinking and feeling individuals interweave their own insights, experiences, and interests with the cultural traditions of their times.

Second, this spotlight on recent field studies of living traditions intentionally complements one of the foci in other issues of *Oral Tradition* on forms which, however “oral” in their earlier composition or circulation, have basically come down to us in the form of written texts. What comes out of the distinctive approach here, then, is not only the chance to extend our experience of human expression through encountering traditions from a culture that may be unfamiliar to many readers, but also a rather different range of questions and issues from those raised in the study of historical texts—an unsurprising result of its main reliance on fieldwork in continuing literary traditions rather than on written texts. Thus there are many more references than is usual to ideas drawn from anthropology, folklore, ethnomusicology, or, to some extent, literary theory (not all will necessarily be familiar—or even perhaps congenial—for all *OT* readers, but the editors have endeavored to ensure that the ideas are generally presented accessibly and not in specialist jargon). The particular issues stressed here should provide not only new insights but also perhaps a challenge to engage in new ways of approaching older material—or, if this kind of investigation is not wholly practicable with some of the historical texts studied elsewhere, at least to raise questions to ponder.

The issues raised in this collection that can, I hope, feed directly into comparative scholarship on oral tradition will only emerge in detail from the later papers themselves. Let me start however by summarizing the main issues quickly, before going on to discuss them more generally in this introduction. They are questions about:

- (1) The nature and view of what is meant by “tradition” (both controversies among outsiders, and the question of how tradition is conceived and practiced by local poets and their audiences themselves).
- (2) The significance of extra-textual elements in oral tradition, in particular of *performance* attributes, of the

visual and non-verbal aspects, and of the *context* (in the widest sense of that term).

- (3) Composition and its relation to performance, the interaction of individual and tradition, and the relevance for wider comparative theories.

These issues in one way or another run through the otherwise differing papers in this collection, and are also taken up for some further comment below (not always in the order given above). They add a fresh light that can complement, challenge, and sometimes confirm the work that has already been done for rather different sources and contexts. In some cases too they can perhaps alert the students of written textual forms and traditions in archival or historical sources to new questions or interpretations that they can try to pursue with their sources. In others (or perhaps this is the same point put more negatively!) they can point up previously unappreciated areas of ignorance that scholars working with older sources may at the least need to take account of and perhaps face up to explicitly. Above all perhaps, it can draw on the well-known rewards of a comparative perspective—familiar already, no doubt, to regular readers of *Oral Tradition*, which draws its inspiration directly from this ideal of comparison. For it can stimulate us to look anew at our own traditions within a wider scale of things, and, having looked (whether from elsewhere in the Pacific or from the viewpoint of a Western outsider), to turn our eyes back to instances within our own culture and history with greater perspective and a clearer eye for distinctive characteristics that we might otherwise take for granted (and, in taking for granted, project too easily onto others) and perhaps then to detect patterns before unnoticed.

“Tradition” and “Oral Tradition” in the Pacific

Perhaps the single most striking conclusion from the papers here is the continuing vitality and interest of oral forms in the Pacific. This presents a marked contrast to some other oral traditions in which the prime scholarly focus often seems to be founded in the urgency of recording them (or their fragments) now before they die out.⁵ Any perusal of the accounts here must surely lead to the conclusion that unwritten songs, dances, narratives, and laments, all drawing primarily (if not necessarily

⁵ For example, one recurrent theme in the recent special issue of *Oral Tradition* on Hispanic Balladry (2/2-3, 1987). Of course in the Pacific as elsewhere fashions change, so certain genres (e.g., those discussed in Margaret Orbell’s paper) are no longer being composed, whereas others have risen in popularity.

exclusively) on oral media and native cultural forms, are still being performed, transmitted, and newly created throughout the islands of the South Pacific.

There is more to be said than that, however, for the concept of “tradition” (or of “traditional,” or of “traditionality”) is a controversial one. It is true that it is often used as a key concept, not only in the title of this journal but also in many discussions about oral literature and the verbal arts—indeed is sometimes taken as a defining characteristic marking out a field of study or a specific set of verbal forms. But it is also of course more elusive and controversial than it sometimes seems on the surface and its problematic nature is now being increasingly discussed (see in particular Henige 1988, also Hobsbawm and Ranger 1987, Ben-Amos 1985, Honko 1988:9-11). This is not the place to enter into such controversies in detail, but they cannot be totally ignored, and it is at the least worth flagging the way that the evidence on the South Pacific presented in this volume can feed into some of this discussion.

How far and in what sense are examples in this volume “traditional” and/or “oral”? Some may wish to query whether the label of “tradition” or “oral tradition” is appropriate at all (at least for some of the examples), on the grounds that only some primal stage or some form untouched by the written word or by Western influences should count. Some Pacific scholars in the past (though fewer in the present) would have taken that attitude too.

That would be a possible—though surely rather extreme—line. But against it one must point out that it does not, in the first place, accord with many of the local perceptions of these oral forms—regarded as a form of continuity from the past, hence in at least one sense “traditional” and local as against what are regarded as outside or Western education-based forms. Secondly, although I would certainly hold that the term “oral” is a much more problematic and relative one than is often assumed (see, e.g., Finnegan 1977, 1988), the preponderance of the songs, laments, and narratives discussed here are at least on the face of it oral in that they are essentially based in spoken or sung—that is *performed*—rather than written formulation, often orally composed in at least some sense of that term, and located within oral conventions. So scholars recording these forms now would surely wish to accept them alongside other comparable forms which *have* been defined as “oral” or as examples of “oral tradition.”

The common (if unstated) association of the idea of the “collective” with tradition is harder to deal with. Some scholars may indeed wish to argue that because individual poets often apparently play a significant role in Pacific oral forms, their products should not after all be treated as “tradition” or “traditional.” But it has to be said that if the empirical evidence (rather than merely questions of logic or definition) is to play a

part, then the findings in this volume certainly suggest that this common association of “tradition” with “the collective” may need to be queried. Thus while many of the Pacific forms discussed here might on superficial study appear to be instances of collective or inert tradition (and so to qualify in the same sense as other examples of “oral tradition”), detailed analysis reveals the complex individual/tradition interaction that lies behind them, where established conventions of content or form do not after all preclude individual creativity. So pure collective “tradition” seems to constantly recede and elude us—does this, therefore, not present some challenge to comparative scholars to look in more detail at other cases, perhaps to modify some earlier definitions and assumptions?

There are certainly problems of interpretation and nomenclature here. But despite such problems it would seem unreasonable to reject at least a preliminary case for provisionally bringing these Pacific examples within the same comparative discussion as the other apparently comparable forms normally included within the scope of “oral tradition,” even if in the last analysis we are still left with the challenge of investigating how far and in what sense these—and indeed the other apparently unambiguous examples elsewhere—are indeed rightly termed instances of oral tradition.

Part of the reason for our difficulty in just asserting that these examples are “oral” and/or “traditional” and leaving it at that is the complexity and elusiveness of so many of the forms being discussed here (in practice perhaps not so unlike other forms widely accepted as falling under the head of “oral tradition”?). Indeed, perhaps the main virtue of the largely field-based and in-depth studies here is precisely that this enables us to glimpse these complexities in a more vivid way than is possible in the case of much archive-based research: long-term observation, direct questioning of poets and narrators, or lengthy experience over many years and changes can all sometimes lead to the discovery of unanticipated insights. In this connection it is interesting how many of the papers in this volume seem to agree in questioning the once taken-for-granted search for old and inert Tradition—the “authentic” survival from a primal and “natural” past. Instead, while starting in other respects from independent stances, they almost all end up in stressing the dynamic and creative processes inherent in “traditional” narratives and songs—sometimes precisely, as Margaret Orbell demonstrates, because they *are* traditional—and the complex and not always predictable roles played by individuals within particular traditions, and by ongoing historical and political events.

However “old” a particular theme or genre may actually or reputedly be in one sense, it seems that its contemporary usage can give it a new meaning and reception. Examples are the old Tokelau song-types described by Thomas and Tuia where composers rework older texts with

new music and choreography to put them in a new light and “remind listeners of their contemporary relevance,” or the new twists given to traditional themes and formulaic expressions in Maori song composition as described in Orbell’s article, where part of the effect and originality lies in the clever way the composer plays on these older themes. Firth comments on Tikopia songs (in a conclusion that could be applied much more widely) that even where the conventions of a traditional genre remain the same, “the *content* was continually changing” as different songs (including newly composed ones) moved in and out of the repertoire according to their popularity at a given time. Individual creativity building on established themes and audience expectations is part of contemporary tradition (“tradition” here being understood—as it would be in the context of written literature surely—in the sense of the established conventions about genre form and content), and thus is itself as authentic as earlier practices—of which it probably represents a continuation. Certainly such processes seem to be a not uncommon part of the present-day local scene and to be regarded locally as currently relevant manifestations of ongoing and valued native cultural tradition.

As well as this deliberate drawing on older themes and conventions, it is also clear that some of the content, genres, or performance techniques are also in one sense new, even if already thoroughly established in the local and—by now—“traditional” repertoire. In other words, texts and performances recorded in the twentieth (or even the nineteenth century) have *not* necessarily come down unchanging from the remote pre-Christian or pre-colonial past, even if they are sometimes assumed to be such by outsiders (or even in some cases by their own native exponents).⁶ Taking the remote Tokelau Islands again, Thomas and Tuia point to some of the changes in genres and performance styles by quoting the octogenarian composer Ihaia’s comment on the way compositions and performances by the younger singers are moving away from what *he* considered the more authentic tradition in action songs—that authentic tradition being, in his eyes, that of relying mainly on “Bible stories”! Christianity, in fact, has become so much a part of Pacific life in many areas that it would in most cases be impossible—and probably unproductive—to try to disentangle it to deduce the properties of some postulated primal stage beforehand. Indeed, Biblical stories have for long now been among the favored themes of Pacific oral arts and feature frequently in locally composed songs and dance dramas.

The South Pacific material illustrates strikingly well (if we still need to remind ourselves of this) that “tradition,” in the sense at least of the

⁶ For a discussion of how even the nineteenth-century classic collections of Pacific “myths” and “traditions” were themselves affected by individual participants and by specific historical circumstances, see Finnegan 1988: ch. 6.

established conventions of composition and performances and the accepted themes and content of oral literary forms, need not be archaic and unchanging—indeed its continued vitality and dynamic in an oral situation, as here, almost guarantees that it will not be. There are the lively and continuously creative Cook Islands ghost stories described in Clerk’s paper, the complex re-creation of older narratives explored by Huntsman, the newly forged songs of the Tongan underdogs in witty and ironic protests against their rulers, or the processes, described so faithfully by John Waiko, by which the clan traditions are successively filtered and codified as generation succeeds generation.

If oral tradition does not remain all of a piece in historical terms, but rather changes and develops over time, neither is it homogeneous or simple at any one time either. The term “oral tradition” is sometimes used with a very realist connotation, as if it represented one monolithic or always uncontested corpus. But it emerges very clearly from many of the accounts here that at any one time there are likely to be many different recognized oral genres, each with its own conventions as regards content, style, purpose, and expected modes of composition and performance (for example, the very different conventions for composition in different Kaluli genres described in Feld’s paper). In addition, there are also often different expectations and pressures among different sections or age groups among the local community. Political pressures and outlooks vary, there are contradictory and competing traditional accounts of events, young people prefer song genres that appeal less to their elders, and rival poets or groupings contend with each other.

It is not only outside scholars who puzzle about the processes of tradition and its transmission or seek ways to represent this process in words, for there are also differing local notions about such matters. John Waiko’s account is particularly illuminating here, with its explanation of the vivid local metaphor of the “fish trap” through which the Binandere picture the past and its transmission to the present. Again, both Wendy Pond’s account of Tongan views of the past as something just *ahead* of us (a similar view, incidentally to that in the Columbian Andes, see Rapaport 1988:721) and Thomas and Tuia’s discussion of the Tokelauan combination of both anonymity *and* personal reputation for their poets in the light of local ideas about the relation between individual and community contrast interestingly with some Western views of these subjects. They can thus provide a useful challenge to otherwise taken-for-granted and ethnocentric views of how “tradition” works and is locally regarded. So too do the instances of the complex and varied interactions between the triad of what Huntsman aptly terms “fact, fiction, and imagination.” In her analysis of Tokelau traditions and their formulation, as well as in Cook Islands spirit narratives, the Binandere sifting of clan traditions, or even the Ponam

visual representation of genealogical traditions, we encounter interesting comparative issues about how people in other cultures represent to themselves the reality of their past and present experience. Such examples stimulate the recognition that there is clearly much here for us still to investigate both in field study and in new perusal of the existing sources.

It is interesting that these points come out so strongly in these accounts of South Pacific tradition. For of all the areas of the world, it might have been expected that it would be in the South Pacific, with its long-standing image in Western eyes of standing for “natural” humanity, that we could find access to the “authentic” and quintessential traditions of the long-distant past. But—even if one accepts such a chimera as worth searching for (something now increasingly queried by modern folklorists, social historians, and anthropologists)—much of what is now regarded and practiced as native tradition and enunciated in oral forms at the local level turns out to be intimately interrelated with the dynamic of nineteenth- and twentieth-century historical changes and to depend for its existence on the creative enterprise of individuals as well as the conventions of both old and developing traditions.

“Tradition” in both theory and practice thus turns out to be interestingly complex and elusive rather than a simply identifiable and concrete phenomenon—so much so that there are times when I am doubtful how far this idea really helps rather than hinders analysis. But one message at least we can draw from the Pacific examples here is that the concept does alert us to a range of questions and controversies which the continuing vitality of *something*—whether we wish to call it “oral tradition” or “verbal art” or “oral literature”—in the Pacific can help to illuminate. At the very least these Pacific instances can disabuse us of some simplistic assumptions about the automatic existence of frozen or sacrosanct “Tradition” from the past, and point to yet further questions about the dynamic interaction of individuals, historical specificity, and established conventions at any one point in time.

Composition: Individual and Tradition

The experience of “tradition”—with all its complications—in the context of the investigation of living traditions can also throw further light on the processes of composition. These processes may still be elusive indeed (even the composers themselves may not be fully aware of what takes place, it seems), but—from Parry and Lord’s eye-opening work on South Slavic epic to more recent research in Africa, Asia, or, as here, the Pacific—it is clear that field-based studies can usually provide more opportunities and insights into this process than are easily open to those

working with archival and historical material. This is all the more interesting since it is clear that new songs and poems are being composed in the Pacific—often within the framework of older traditions—and several of the papers comment directly or indirectly on the compositional processes underlying these or the way they become translated into performance.

One of the striking features of the forms from the Pacific that are illustrated here is the *variety* of modes of composition. Steven Feld's paper shows this particularly well when he explains the composition-in-performance mode of the soloistic Kaluli laments and contrasts this phenomenon with the different—and themselves varying—forms of composition in Kaluli songs where (depending on the precise genre) there can be memorization, prior composition, separation from performance, or the concept of a fixed text. Again, even within the same general category of song, different processes may be at work depending on the occasion, as with the Tikopia sexual taunting songs described by Firth, with some composed and worked up beforehand, some uttered in a trance (one common Pacific pattern), and some made up on the spot as a clever response to a song by an opposing group. Again the dance-drama described by McMath and Parima was largely prepared and planned beforehand, but still included some scope for improvisation by participants in certain of the elements of the performance. Even a single composer—like the admired Tokelau composer Ihaia—could use a series of different strategies, it seems: sometimes collaborating with his wife (joint composition being another common Pacific pattern), sometimes composing on his own (or with an assistant to memorize the words for him to be ready for the later group rehearsal—again not unparalleled), and varying between reworking old songs with new meanings and performances and composing anew and often with an intensely personal touch but within the established conventions.

We also encounter interesting variants on what at first sight look like familiar patterns. Margaret Orbell's paper provides a detailed explanation of how Maori women used formulaic expression in their love songs not in the context of composition-in-performance but as an effective mode, building on their own tradition of *prior* composition, to make witty play on accepted formulaic expressions and themes and startle their audiences with their unexpected new twists—a subtle example of the interaction of individual and tradition in composing.

Much of the scholarly literature on oral composition concentrates on poetic forms, and so it is interesting to consult analyses of prose. Judith Huntsman's discussion of variants of a particular narrative and their background makes fascinating reading, with her detailed description of the personal experiences (including indirect interaction with written forms)

that lay behind the renderings, and her interesting contrast of the differing constraints on individual variation within the “true” (*tala*) and the “fictional” (*kakai*) accounts respectively. A fresh light is also thrown on the whole subject of the creation of traditions in John Waiko’s analysis of the filtering of clan and other narratives among the Binandere, where these accounts are not formulated by expert narrators but are generated in the sifting of traditional accounts through the successive generations.

An interest in the interaction between individual creativity and the demands of traditional or collective conventions of style, theme, or occasion runs through most of the accounts here. The exact nature of this balance seems to vary not only between different cultures but also with genre, historical setting, and even individual composer and performer, and thus clearly demands specific investigation in its own right rather than generalized prediction. In this connection there seem to be some interesting variations in the attribution of authorship and ownership. In some cases (as described by Firth of the Tikopia, Pond for Tonga), names of the composers are known and remembered, perhaps over several generations. By contrast, as Thomas and Tuia bring out in their intriguing account of the interaction between collectivity and individuality, Tokelauan composers are anonymous—and yet may have high personal reputations. This is obviously a complex topic on which it is impossible to draw definitive conclusions. What does emerge is the possibility that in the past we may have placed too much emphasis on the tradition and the collective side of the interaction, and not enough on the scope for individuality and creativity. It is of course too easy just to take poets’ own interpretations of what they do as the final word, but Judith Huntsman has a point when she stresses the value of asking the composers themselves—they can sometimes give us “answers unimagined”—just as the poet Ihaia’s own words can give us new insights into the creative process (Thomas and Tuia):

When I begin a *fatele* [action song], I don’t think or worry about it, it will come naturally. No guessing or uncertainty, I will just pick it up. For the words: a bit here, a bit there, a bit here, a bit there, and . . . got one! . . . Once the words are in my head the tune is also already there . . . More words, more ideas keep coming into my mind. It is a gift of God, there is nothing about it which is difficult for me. It is quite simple to create a *fatele*, the more you do the easier it is.

None of the examples discussed in this volume are of the lengthy poetic form that would make them comparable with the epic and heroic songs discussed in some of the classic literature on oral tradition, such as Lord’s *The Singer of Tales* (1960). And it is in any case misleading to draw exact or generalizing analogies from one culture or genre to another (in *either* direction). But if direct feedback into a single theory about composition is not possible, nevertheless the Pacific evidence can highlight

certain very relevant—and sometimes overlooked—points for a comparative perspective on the subject. First, there is the existence of a *number* of patterns within and around the process of composition in the Pacific. One of these patterns is indeed some version of the rather broad (and itself sometimes a touch elusive) pattern known as “oral-formulaic.” But there are also others which, perhaps, may be of wider occurrence than has been appreciated in the past and which are therefore worth being alerted to. The second point worth stressing is the occurrence of *differing* combinations and permutations in actual usage (even for a given composer there may not just be one mode in which he composes) and the way both individuals and cultures can play on and with these forms. Once again we meet that well-worn interaction between individual and tradition—but an interaction in which not only are individuals sometimes more personally creative and self-conscious than has often been recognized, but also—equally importantly—in which the tradition is not a passive and inert mass but itself part of the dynamic.

Texts and Extratextual Features: Performance, Nonverbal Representation, and Visual Features

Another notable feature of many of the traditions discussed here is the way texts seldom stand alone as verbal formulations. As will be clear from most papers in this volume, they almost always form part of a wider communication context, often of music, song, dance, or visual representation.

Some texts on the surface look very short and “simple,” and it is especially important to bear in mind the complexities and (sometimes) intensity of emotion carried in performance—for these are all performance texts rather than designed to be taken in and assessed through the reader’s eye alone. To ignore this element of performance would be to seriously misunderstand their actual meaning and purpose in practice. This is well exemplified in, for example, the accounts by Pond and by Orbell, where the richness and originality inherent in what looks on the face of it like extremely simple wording or the passive rendering of unchanging “tradition” only come through with an understanding of the circumstances of performance. Thomas and Tuia similarly comment on a brief six-line Tokelauan song:

It must be remembered too that this short text is appreciated in actual performance rather than through reading. [It] begins with the text sung slowly, unadorned by the dance. As the text is repeated dance movements are added (some of which highlight aspects of the text), the tempo accelerates, and other music and dance intensification creates an exhilarating experience. The repetitions of the text provide opportunities for enjoyment

and contemplation of its message and craftsmanship.

The Manganian dance drama described in the final paper illustrates particularly vividly the complex interaction of the many performance processes—in which the verbal text is only one element—that make up this complex art form; but something of this composite contribution of many modes is evident to one extent or another in practically all the oral forms described here. Discussing the interpretation or nature of these oral traditions without taking account of these other aspects would be to miss their reality: such aspects are not just optional extras but essential. Thus to focus on verbal *text* only is too narrow. (Is there perhaps a wider message here for other studies of oral tradition and, indeed, of forms which it can perhaps be misleading, as well as illuminating, to call “oral literature”—for far more than just literature [in a textual sense] is involved?)

An emphasis on the processes of performance thus runs through most of the reports here. South Pacific oral traditions are designed as performance-based rather than to-be-read texts, with performance characteristics as much as purely verbal style or content often constituting the basis of genre attribution. So this is an aspect which we obviously must take seriously. This approach also fits with recent theoretical concerns in folklore and anthropology with their emphasis on the central (not just additional) role of performance in the study of oral literature or verbal art,⁷ an approach to oral forms that is likely to become of increasing importance in the study of oral tradition.

Field-based studies like those recorded here provide researchers with particular opportunities to become alerted to the significance of performance (one of the fruits also of Parry and Lord’s fieldwork in Yugoslavia). Performance may take place before their very eyes, and can be investigated further by questioning and observing both performers and audience at first hand—an opportunity clearly not so open to researchers on historical or archival texts and no doubt one eminently intelligible reason why such researchers have paid so much less attention to questions of performance. It does not follow, however, that performance features were therefore unimportant in the case of such texts. Perhaps they cannot be satisfactorily investigated in any direct way—if so, that is sad and we may indeed need to concentrate on other more amenable questions. But we do need to be wary of just concluding automatically from our own lack of access to the evidence that performance aspects were *therefore* of secondary significance in such texts, as is sometimes implied (e.g., in

⁷ See particularly the work of so-called performance-oriented folklorists/anthropologists (such as Roger Abrahams, Richard Bauman, Dell Hymes, and similar writers—for summary and reference see, e.g., Bauman 1977, 1989; Finnegan 1977: ch. 4).

Lord's recent incisive paper on the nature of oral poetry, 1987:326,345): that would be to let the argument from silence take us too far. On a more positive note, it is also possible that as questions about performance become more recognized as potentially important in the study of oral tradition it may turn out that their indirect investigation may sometimes be more feasible than used to be assumed when such aspects were considered of little interest anyhow (this possibility is well demonstrated in Margaret Orbell's re-analysis of historical Maori texts or by the way in which Pond, McMath, and Parima are able to draw from historical sources as well as field research).

At any rate, the papers here, and the experience of South Pacific oral traditions, point us in the direction of emphasizing the significance of performance. They can provide not so much direct evidence to generalize from but some suggestive indications of the *kinds* of performance features—and the possible questions—that we might be able to investigate in other traditions: for example, the often-structuring role of music (both vocal and instrumental); different modes of delivery (whether recited or sung, group or solo); repetitions; delivery techniques through, for instance, voice modulation, gesture, mime, or dramatization; dance and display; specific occasions; and audience interaction. All these are aspects where, as Foley cogently argues, information from the study of living traditions can provide us with some indirect “comparative assistance . . . for literatures whose original form and context are lost to us” (1988:110).

The *visual* representation of tradition is another particularly challenging facet of traditions in the South Pacific. This goes further than just the visual way in which gestures enliven performance, or costume, dance, and mime provide vehicles for communication as well as heard words—although these are all noteworthy elements of performance. But it also extends to the way in which, for example, particular string figures are associated with stories (in a sense stand for them), and tradition and memory are enshrined not in words alone but in plastic art or in statements through self-decoration (see, e.g., Küchler 1987, Sillitoe 1988). This element comes out with particular force in the Carriers' striking paper where they argue—and provide detailed evidence in support—that for the Ponam people in Papua New Guinea non-verbal and visual modes played a crucial part in the transmission and formulation of certain of their traditions and that the verbal accompaniments to these played a secondary role only (rather than, as we would perhaps conclude for any form of verbalizable tradition, forming the essential constituent). This conclusion perhaps throws a new and challenging light on what we conceive as “oral tradition,” with the implication that writing is not the only alternative to spoken verbal communication for the encapsulation of unwritten traditions. As the Carriers point out, to assume that the *verbal* elements are

necessarily central here would be to “unthinkingly reproduce and impose on the people we study the Western valuation of verbal communication.”

At first sight this may seem a strange emphasis to outsiders. Indeed on the basis of this (and similar) evidence from the Pacific it could be suggested that one distinctive characteristic of many cultures in the South Pacific is a particularly developed sense of the visual representation of art and communication (a feature, incidentally, that makes the inclusion of the photographs in this issue especially appropriate). This aspect is apparently less developed in Western culture and as such will be of particular comparative interest for Western scholars.

A further step in this argument, however, could also be the suggestion that a visual element, combined perhaps with an emphasis on the verbal and textual, has formed a more important element in Western culture than is often explicitly recognized by scholars—or maybe even by the participants themselves (masked even from them perhaps by the powerful intellectual focus on the force of the alphabetically written word), and that it is therefore only when Western scholars look at *unfamiliar* cultural forms that this aspect stands out clearly. If so, greater awareness of how the visual and verbal mutually interact in Pacific contexts may stimulate more work on such aspects for Western tradition (both oral and perhaps written) to complement the relatively few but increasing number of historians and others who are now drawing on interdisciplinary insights to call our attention more forcibly to the role played by, for example, woodcuts and other visual propaganda even in contexts where in the past the conventional wisdom took the *written* texts and sources to be central (e.g. Scribner 1981).

Either way, this visual emphasis in Pacific culture is clearly an aspect where Western scholars have much to learn from Pacific experience. It can open their eyes to new and different ways of embellishing oral tradition or—at the least—sensitize them to an aspect of their own culture to which they may in the past have paid too little attention.

Significance of Cultural Context in Interpreting Oral Traditions

The evidence from the papers here bears out the point made by Foley and others (e.g., Foley 1988:109f.) that the study of oral traditions needs to take account of differences not just generalities—a point that would certainly be congenial to most anthropologists. In other words, for a full understanding we have to know the specifics of particular traditions and genres—the Pacific emphasis on performance or visual representation, for example, or the many differing genres within Maori, Tikopian, or Kaluli oral forms—for it turns out that we cannot just assume in advance

that because some form has been labelled “oral” or even “traditional oral” that we already know all about its likely characteristics.

The same point also applies to other aspects of the forms discussed here, in particular to the whole cultural context in which they are performed and transmitted, and to the elusive question of their uses or purposes. There are many examples in these papers of the way in which the songs or narratives (or at least their meanings) cannot be grasped without some knowledge of the historical or contemporary background as experienced by those who compose, deliver, or listen to them. For example, appreciating the layers of meaning, complex metaphors, and witty word-play in the Tongan protest songs described by Pond is only possible with some understanding of the current power relations and their history in Tongan society, just as modern experience as well as traditional verbal forms gives the context for the Cook Islands ghost stories, while Kaluli laments are informed by both the gender differences and the interplay between the individual and the collective within their basically egalitarian society. Such understanding can only come with the in-depth study of particular cultures, and renders by now unacceptable the older practice of the rapid collection of texts without full background information.

The wider context that gives the traditions meaning may also include not just the historical background but also the immediate delivery and setting (in the sense of the occasion in its historical and social specificity), as well as the local resonances of the content and themes of the genre, and the performance in all its rich musical and choreographic setting (see above). There are also occasions where one needs to know about the actual or intended audience (important, for example, in the cleverly concealed meanings in Tongan songs) or, as the paper by Thomas and Tuia illustrates, the known personality and reputation of an individual composer.

All these factors can thus be relevant for a full understanding of the meaning of songs or narratives. Such aspects, however, are too often neglected in the interpretation of texts. The kinds of examples provided here are thus not just of interest for their own sake (though they are that), but can also suggest insights and questions worth exploring in other cases of oral traditional forms and in a wider comparative framework.

If meanings are not always self-evident from the texts alone, the related question of the interpretation of their uses or purposes is perhaps even more knotty. It is easy to substitute speculation for evidence here—the scholarly literature is full of examples. This is not just a characteristic of text-based historical disciplines, for, despite its emphasis on firsthand field observation, it must be confessed that anthropology too has been far from exempt from this tendency. Earlier this century, for example, a generalized and simplistic functionalist interpretation was the fashionable one among many anthropologists, depending on the assumption

that oral formulations, whether in the form of “myths,” tales, or songs, were ultimately to be analyzed in terms of their support for the status quo: institutions which thus upheld the current social and power structure and (implicitly at least) inhibited change. This kind of crude reductionism is now less acceptable as a general theory in anthropology, although paradoxically it is now sometimes being echoed by scholars in other disciplines drawing on the earlier anthropological work. It is increasingly being replaced by a more differentiated interest in the specific roles and dynamics of particular oral genres (perhaps varying on different occasions or as used by different personalities) which—as well exemplified in the papers here—can only be investigated by close study of particulars.

The modern tendency in much anthropology and folklore is now far more to envisage and investigate the possibility that oral traditions may be locally regarded and valued as forms of artistic or emotional expression—works of the human imagination with more, or less, space for the age-old and probably worldwide dynamic between the individual and the tradition. This possible set of roles is never exactly easy to prove definitively (is it in literate contexts either?), and dogmatic assertions on these lines may themselves face later reassessment. But it certainly seems from many of the papers here that something of this kind is often very definitely to the fore in the local perceptions and practices of many of the Pacific oral forms. As comes out in most of the discussions—especially though not exclusively of the poetic forms—these forms express, and are intended to express, not just simple “content” or passive tradition, but subtle and often reflective comment (irony, protest, surprise, lament), created and interpreted by individuals within continuing (or new) local traditions. They can carry intense connotations or metaphorical associations (through their images of place-names, of flowers, or of winds and mountains, for example), representing the imaginative and aesthetic side of human culture in a way which makes it wholly suitable to interpret one facet of these as constituting forms of expressive art whatever their other additional roles within the culture.

There is now also more awareness of another aspect that comes out very clearly in several of the papers here: the way in which oral forms can be used not only by the powerful or educated, but also by those whom otherwise we might not hear or might too easily ignore: the poor, the non-literate, the members of apparently isolated or marginal islands in the “Third World,” or, within particular communities, those who, like the women discussed by Orbell, Firth, or Feld, or the underprivileged groups expressing their views in song in the remoter Tongan islands, might seem at first sight not to have a voice. But once we start to pay attention, they turn out to have their own effective ways in which they can express their interests and emotions in artistic form and so interpret and thus in a sense

form their own identity and the world around them.

This recent emphasis on the artistic and personal roles of oral forms is something which perhaps could only come out of the kind of fieldwork and long experience reported here, with its opportunities for seeing how these oral forms are actually *used*. It is from this firsthand observation that we can gain an impression of the subtle, clever, sophisticated ways in which people play with and within their traditions. The picture we end up with is very different from the literal-minded and even mechanical generalized view of “oral tradition” given in some older publications. We can now aspire instead to investigate issues having to do with active human processes of artistry, reflection, creative manipulation of established conventions, and even—as with any of us—of human suffering or fallibility.

Postscript: Order and Preview of the Papers

A brief preview of the papers severally may help the reader to appreciate some of the other themes that can feed into wider discussion. The collection starts from the more “poetic” or musically based forms—in particular the songs for which the South Pacific is rightly so famous and which tend to attract particular local prestige and expertise. After a brief portrait of one of the poets, it then moves to discussions (and examples) of more “prose”-based narrative,⁸ followed by the provocative exploration of some visually and materially based forms of transmitting and exemplifying unwritten tradition. Finally, the collection is concluded by McMath and Parima’s magnificent account of an art form that, even more than all the others (although there are traces of this breadth in all of them), unites the various strands, not only of the “old” and the “new,” but also of both “prose” and “verse,” visual display and verbal elaboration, as well as the interplay of composer, performer, and audience in a live tradition.

The brief overviews of each paper that follow are not intended to serve as definitive abstracts, but rather to indicate the genres and areas discussed, the main lines of interpretation and the kinds of questions of potential comparative interest that are being pursued. Although these comprise only an illustrative set of cases, and certainly not a comprehensive account of the findings or scholarship from this great area of the globe, it will, I hope, emerge yet more clearly from this introduction—and, best, from the detailed papers that follow—that oral

⁸ There are of course well-known and justified controversies over importing the often taken-for-granted distinction between prose and verse into oral literature; but since, despite the problematic and relative status of such a distinction, there is at least some kind of continuum we decided to use it as a rough guide to the ordering.

tradition in the South Pacific and its study has much to offer to the comparatist.

The collection opens with Margaret Orbell's discussion (which, unlike the later papers, is based on early archival and historical sources) elucidating the form, mode of composition, and use of traditional themes in Maori women's love songs. Relating her analysis to the wider literature, she emphasizes that composition-in-performance has indeed been established as one process through which poets make use of set themes and formulaic expressions (as in Lord's study of South Slavic oral epic poetry). But familiar themes and formulae can also, she explains, be used in an alternative way: as a basis for prior-composed songs that are later performed as fixed texts. She illustrates this situation from the example of Maori women's love songs and shows among other things how the cluster of well-known themes and set expressions—a tradition—and the audience's familiarity with these could in itself lead to poetic creativity, for example in the way a poet could produce witty play on conventions in her compositions or cleverly take unexpected liberties with these traditional forms. Poets thus used set expressions with great freedom, in fact needed to do so to introduce their individual voices within these short and otherwise somewhat predictable songs. This form of composition thus produces a subtle balance between tradition and personal originality while at the same time making extensive use of formulaic expression. Various texts of love songs are quoted to illustrate and support the argument and some of their related roles for the culture and individuals discussed.

The protest songs from three isolated northern islands in the kingdom of Tonga described in Wendy Pond's paper ("Wry Comment From the Outback") exhibit one of the common roles of poetry—a mode of expression employed by people who are otherwise poor and powerless in opposition to their powerful rulers. They convey their ideas and experience through the subtle medium of their songs, where the inner meaning is veiled from outsiders, to be understood only by those for whom it is intended. The islanders also use their songs as an artistically wrought poetic medium to comment on their own lives with wit, irony, and skillful imagery. As well as illustrating the argument with examples and analyses of these local songs, the paper also provides a telling example of the impossibility of grasping the complexities of meaning from the texts alone, without having some understanding of the political and historical background and of the varied local interpretations of a multiplicity of meanings.

Raymond Firth's account of taunting songs between the sexes in Tikopia takes up something of the same theme of the power given through song to what in other respects might be a submerged group—in this case women in the mainly male-oriented public life of Tikopia. It becomes

clear in this vivid account of the processes of taunting sung interchanges between young men and women that the women too demonstrate remarkable freedom and independence of thought. These choral dance songs are set in the wider framework of Tikopian song, and numerous texts are used to illustrate their wit and metaphorical expression, in particular their rich floral metaphors, and how they are performed and composed, with both old songs being repeated and new ones composed drawing on the traditional images.

Steven Feld's "Wept Thoughts" is a commentary on one of the most basic genres in South Pacific life (and perhaps also, as he suggests, basic to human poetic development more generally): the lament. The women's ritual wailing known as *sa-yalab* among the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea provides an illustration of the interplay between individual emotion and collective forms so typical of the lament. This is a complex interplay that, as Feld demonstrates, can throw new light on the particular form of composition-in-performance characteristic of this lament form (but not, it appears, of Kaluli *song* genres, which are characterized by different compositional conventions). For a full appreciation the laments also need to be seen against the background of their mode of performance and creation (soloistic but collaborative) and of local views about gender differences and about personal autonomy and experience within the wider egalitarian ethos of the Kaluli; a verbal text alone could in no way convey their richness.

The paper by Allan Thomas and Tokelauan scholar Ineleo Tuia gives us a personal portrait (in photographs as well as words) of an individual "maker of songs" in the Tokelau Islands, one who composes both the words and the music and—since these are performed songs to be danced as well as sung—is also often the choreographer as well. His various modes of composition are discussed and illustrated, supplemented by some thought-provoking comments on the complex relationship between individuality and community in Tokelauan culture as regards the ownership, composition, and performance of songs. Contrary to the impression often given in collections of music or texts, composers are unique individuals whose known background and personality form part of the context—and hence meaning—of their songs as actually performed and appreciated in the local community.

We are then introduced to prose narrative through Judith Huntsman's presentation and analysis of three different versions that she recorded of the "same" Tokelau narrative. Although the basic story was an older one, the actual renderings can be regarded as examples of creative art rather than inert "tradition." The analysis uses detailed consultation with individual narrators to illuminate the quite specific (and unexpected) ways in which they both molded the narratives they had heard and manipulated

the notions of fact and fiction within the local narrative genres of *kakai* (entertaining fictional story) and *tala* (true account)—a far more personal and firsthand account of the processes of oral transmission than we can normally reach. Huntsman concludes by reminding us of the insights that can be gained from leaving aside generalized speculation in favor of consulting the experience of the narrators themselves.

The interplay of narrative and experience is also a theme in Christian Clerk's analysis of ghost stories in the Cook Islands. This lively and creative tradition, both directly located within the realities of contemporary local life and also founded in the structure and themes of older forms, provides a striking illustration of the processes of continuity and adaptation within local traditions. As well as the distinctive local themes and references (building, for example, on animal imagery and on specific associations with places, fragrances, and bodily sensations), many features of these tales will also be of interest within the wider comparative study of urban legends.

John Waiko's unique account of how oral traditions are shaped and transmitted by members of the small Binandere group in Papua New Guinea combines the perspective of the academic historian with the firsthand insights of the insider reflecting on the processes inherent in the oral traditions of his own people. He explains the native Binandere concepts of the nature and formulation of oral tradition, drawing on their imagery of the conical fish trap through which the traditions are filtered and stored. He also illustrates the complex developing ways in which these traditions are created and codified in sophisticated oral art forms at various levels—both narratives and sung poetic genres—and how a spontaneous individual expression of emotion is taken up and shaped by the gifted poets and singers to become a work of art. He concludes by emphasizing that even in this egalitarian society, which on the face of it has no specialists to take responsibility for creating and transmitting oral traditions, there are nevertheless established mechanics and concepts through which these traditions are developed as part of an ongoing cultural process.

The paper by James and Achsah Carrier is the joker in the pack—for it concentrates on *non-verbal* forms of tradition. The Ponam people of Papua New Guinea portray and transmit important elements of their tradition through visual and material forms, in particular through their complex system of gift displays. At first sight the ethnography of Ponam gift interchange may seem far from the concerns of students of oral tradition, but, as the authors make clear, their approach raises a challenge for all those concerned with the study of oral tradition: can the centrality almost always given to *words* in our analyses of unwritten traditions be justified? Even where words do play a part, do they need to be regarded in a wider framework in which visual and material modes of communication

may give them additional meaning—or even somehow constitute much of their primary meaning? And are there ways other than spoken transmission through which unwritten but cognitively meaningful traditions can be symbolized and transmitted, and if so, should this make us reassess the quality of the “oralness” in “oral tradition” that we tend to take for granted without questioning?

To conclude, McMath and Parima give us a text, translation, and description of a remarkable dance-drama performed during one of the regular festivals in a village in the small island of Mangaia in the southern Cook Islands in 1973, together with some description of its composition, performance, and audience responses. Far from “dying out,” as some commentators earlier predicted of oral tradition in the Pacific islands, this performance—apparently one of many similar ones—represents a notable blend of traditional Mangaian art forms and legends, Christian themes, and reflections of modern society. The paper demonstrates well the ongoing creative processes in this striking—and entertaining—synthesis of new and old. It also gives us some vicarious experience of a rich and flexible art form which, in some ways reminiscent of classical Greek drama, deploys not only the arts of words (both spoken dialog and sung chorus), but also of music, dance, mime, the visual display of costume and special effects, and the heightened atmosphere created by the artful and emotive beat of the drum—thus reminding us yet again of the significance of the complex and often many-faceted processes of performance that in one way or another underlie so many forms of Pacific oral traditions.

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