

Oral Tradition, 18/2 (2003): 166-168

Oral Tradition as a Worldwide Phenomenon

J. M. Pedrosa

Oral tradition

It is my view that oral tradition is the source of all of the world's literary traditions. Two principal concerns have driven my work (1995, 2000, 2002): the collection of examples of living oral literature (ballads, songs, proverbs, legends, stories, oral history, and epics) in different countries and traditions (Spain, Hispanoamerica, central Africa), and the comparative study of world literary traditions from Homer to García Márquez.

I have come to the conclusion that oral literature created and influences written literatures, including contemporary works of fiction, in much more profound and decisive ways than is generally recognized. Additionally, oral tradition affords scholars clear and transparent examples of different strategies for creating symbols, metaphors, and motifs. The analysis of oral literature also sheds light on the aesthetic strategies of literary authors whose stylistic sophistication tends to obscure those modes of symbolic, metaphoric, and motific production in their work, strategies that rarely differ from those manifest in oral literature.

New directions

My early research was focused on songs and ballads. Recently, I have become director of the "Atlas of Myth and Legends in the Hispanic World," and of ancillary projects such as the "Atlas of Myth and Legends of the Basque." I am also directing theses on the oral traditions of various countries (Ecuador, Brazil, Niger, Benin, Madagascar, and so on). These experiences have led me to conclude that the field of folk legend, less well-studied than that of the folktale, possesses enormous aesthetic and literary interest, and perhaps even greater sociological and anthropological value. Legends are imbued with more local references, more communal and

ideological values than are stories. The extraordinary and original work of Linda Dégh strikes me, for that reason, as enormously attractive for future research (1995, 2001). The stunning advances made in the study of genetic populations bodes well for projects in comparative cartography: the elaboration of maps and atlases depicting the migration of oral literatures superimposed upon maps tracing demographic and genetic migrations. I believe such studies could flourish in the twenty-first century. It seems to me that the work of specialists such as Luigi Cavalli-Sforza (2000) on the parallel evolution and development of genes, peoples, and languages could usefully be amplified by taking into consideration another element: oral tradition.

Universidad de Alcalá-Henares
Translated by John Zemke

References

- Armistead 1992 Samuel G. Armistead. *The Spanish Tradition in Louisiana*. Newark: Juan de la Cuesta.
- Cavalli-Sforza 2000 Luigi Luca Cavalli-Sforza. *Genes, Peoples, and Languages*. New York: North Point Press.
- Dégh 2001 Linda Dégh. *Legend and Belief: Dialectics of a Folklore Genre*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Dégh 1995 _____. *Narratives in Society: A Performer-Centered Study of Narration*. Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia and Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Frenk 1975-85 Margit Frenk. *Cancionero folklórico de México*. 5 vols. México D. F.: El Colegio de México.
- Camarena and Chevalier
1995-2003 Julio Camarena Laucirica and Maxime Chevalier. *Catálogo tipológico del cuento folklórico español*. 4 vols. Madrid-Alcalá de Henares: Gredos-Centro de Estudios Cervantinos.
- López 1998 Jesús Suárez López. *Cuentos del Siglo de Oro en la tradición oral de Asturias*. Gijón: Museo del Pueblo de Asturias.

- Pedrosa 1995 José Manuel Pedrosa. *Las dos sirenas y otros estudios de literatura tradicional*. Madrid: Siglo XXI.
- Pedrosa 2000 _____. *Entre la magia y la religión: oraciones, conjuros, ensalmos*. Oiartzun: Sendoa.
- Pedrosa 2002 _____. *Bestiario: antropología y simbolismo animal*. Madrid: Medusa.

For further information on Hispanic, central African, and other oral traditions, see the following journals.

Estudos de Literatura Oral, published by Universidade do Algarve, Portugal.

Revista de Investigaciones Folklóricas, published in Buenos Aires under the direction of Martha Blache.