

Oral Tradition, 18/2 (2003): 164-165

Oral Tradition: A Definition

Carlos Nogueira

What is oral tradition?

In the vast system of forms and modes of communication denominated by the syntagma “oral” tradition, which congregates knowledge, memories, values, and symbols generally configured in linguistic objects of non-literary or aesthetic-literary nature, objects with or without consignment in written testimonies, accomplished vocally and recognizable collectively and during consecutive generations in an anatomy built by the laws of traditionality (anonymity, persistence, variation), I position myself specifically in the field of the brief or minimal poetry, lyric (mainly poems of four, five, or six verses) but also narrative-dramatic (traditional narrative songs).

New directions

In the present day, studies on oral tradition cannot afford to overlook the mutations typical of textual typologies, in the co-textual dimension—as in the contexts, the complex of cultural activities from which explicitly or implicitly the texts proceed and with which they interact. As important as the prolation of the text of oral literature through the voice, here and now, without any other channel and vehicle except the natural ones, today we must pay close attention to the transmission/re-creation of the constituent signs of that text materialized in substances and peculiar forms, that is, graphic, visual or audiovisual and resounding, typographic and electronic, digital and analogical forms. The process of mediatization gives density; it democratizes and eternalizes the oral literary word, which, instead of being fossilized by the action of that apparent crystallization, establishes more and more subtle relationships with a public far more massive than the popular audience. And, if we remember that the tradition is a living, dynamic, and malleable organism, then it won't seem problematic to admit the original system of old traditional elements with other more modern features (for example, traditional music or *fado* with dance music). The result is the

appearance of products with artistic and pragmatic dimensions and with a memorial presence larger than that of its more ancient congeners.

Universidade de Lisboa

References

- Finnegan 1992 Ruth Finnegan. *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance and Social Context*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. Orig. publ. 1977.
- Ong 1995 Walter J. Ong. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the World*. London: Routledge.
- Zumthor 1979 Paul Zumthor. "Pour une poétique de la voix." *Poétique*, 40:514-24.
- Zumthor 1982 _____. "Le discours de la poésie orale." *Poétique*, 52:387-401.
- Zumthor 1983 _____. *Introduction à la poésie orale*. Paris: Edition du Seuil.
- Zumthor 1987 _____. *La Lettre et la voix*. Paris: Edition du Seuil.