Oral Literature in the Digital Age

Archiving Orality and Connecting with Communities

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Introduction

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Collecting, protecting and connecting oral literature

This volume is an essential guide and handbook for ethnographers, field linguists, community activists, curators, archivists, librarians, and all who connect with indigenous communities in order to document and preserve oral traditions.

For societies in which traditions are conveyed more through speech than through writing, oral literature has long been the mode of communication for spreading ideas, knowledge and history. The term "oral literature" broadly includes ritual texts, curative chants, epic poems, folk tales, creation stories, songs, myths, spells, legends, proverbs, riddles, tongue-twisters, recitations and historical narratives. In most cases, such traditions are not translated when a community shifts to using a more dominant language.

Oral literatures are in decline as a result of a cultural focus on literacy, combined with the disappearance of minority languages. The *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*,[1] released by UNESCO in early 2009, claims that around a third of the 6,500 languages spoken around the globe today are in danger of disappearing forever. Globalisation and rapid socio-economic change exert particularly complex pressures on smaller communities of speakers, often eroding expressive diversity and transforming culture through assimilation to more dominant ways of life. Until relatively recently, few indigenous peoples have had easy access to effective tools to document

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1   See <http://www.unesco.org/culture/languages-atlas/> [Accessed 19 November 2012].

their own cultural knowledge, and there is still little agreement on how collections of oral literature should be responsibly managed, archived and curated for the future.

The online archiving of audio and video recordings of oral literature is a technique of cultural preservation that has been widely welcomed by indigenous communities around the world. The World Oral Literature Project, established at the University of Cambridge in 2009 and co-located at Yale University since 2011, has a mission to "collect, protect and connect" endangered traditions. The Project facilitates partnerships between fieldworkers, archivists, performers of oral literature, and community representatives to document oral literature in ways that are ethically and practically appropriate. Our fieldwork grant scheme has funded the collection of audio and video recordings from nine countries in four continents. In addition, Project staff have digitised and archived older collections of oral literature, as well as contemporary recordings that are "born digital" but which were funded by other sources. At present, these collections represent a further twelve countries, amounting to over 400 hours of audio and video recordings of oral traditions now hosted for free on secure servers on the Project website.[2]

The World Oral Literature Project's strong focus on cooperation and understanding ensures that source communities retain full copyright and intellectual property over recordings of their traditions. Materials are protected for future posterity through accession to a secure digital archival platform with a commitment to migrating files to future digital formats as new standards emerge. Returning digitised materials to performers and communities frequently helps to protect established living traditions, with materials used for language education as well as programmes that aim to revitalise cultural heritage practices.[3] The inclusion of extensive metadata, including contextual details relating to the specific oral literature performance alongside its history and cultural significance, allows researchers and interested parties from diverse disciplines to connect with and experience the performative power of the collection. For example, while a musicologist might study the instrumental technique of a traditional song, a linguist would focus on grammatical structures in the verse, and an anthropologist might explore the social meaning and

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2   See <http://www.oralliterature.org/collections> [Accessed 19 November 2012].

3   See the Digital Return research network for more discussion on these issues: <http://digitalreturn.wsu.edu> [Accessed 19 November 2012].

cultural values conveyed through the lyrics. Innovative digital archiving techniques support the retrieval of granular metadata that is relevant to specific research interests, alongside providing an easy way to stream or download the audio and video files from the web. In this manner, we have been able to connect recordings of oral literature to a broad community of users and researchers. In turn, this contributes to an appreciation of the beauty and complexity of human cultural diversity.

Coming together, sharing practices

The second annual workshop hosted by the World Oral Literature Project at the University of Cambridge in 2010, entitled *Archiving Orality and Connecting with Communities*, brought together more than 60 ethnographers, field linguists, community activists, curators, archivists and librarians. Organised with support from the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (CRASSH), Cambridge; the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge; and the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO), the assembled delegates explored key issues around the dissemination of oral literature through traditional and digital media. Presentations from representatives of institutions in eight countries prompted fieldworkers to consider how best to store and disseminate their recordings and metadata; while archivists and curators were exposed to new methods of managing collections with greater levels of cultural sensitivity and through cooperative partnerships with cultural stakeholders.

Workshop panels were focused around a central theme: When new publics consume, manipulate and connect with field recordings and digital archival repositories of linguistic and cultural content, their involvement raises important practical and ethical questions about access, ownership, and permanence. These issues are reflected in a current trend among funding agencies, including the World Oral Literature Project's own fieldwork grants programme, to encourage fieldworkers to return copies of their material to source communities, as well as to deposit collections in institutional repositories. Thanks to ever-greater digital connectivity, wider Internet access and affordable multimedia recording technologies, the locus of dissemination and engagement has grown beyond that of researcher and research subject to include a diverse constituency of global users such as migrant workers, indigenous scholars, policymakers and journalists, to name but a few. Participants at the workshop explored key

issues around the dissemination of oral literature, reflecting particularly on the impact of greater digital connectivity in extending the dissemination of fieldworkers' research and collections beyond traditional audiences.

Emerging from some of the most compelling presentations at the workshop, chapters in Part 1 of this volume raise important questions about the political repercussions of studying marginalised languages; the role of online tools in ensuring responsible access to sensitive cultural materials; and methods of avoiding fossilisation in the creation of digital documents. Part 2 consists of workshop papers presented by fieldworkers in anthropology and linguistics, all of whom reflect on the processes and outcomes of their own fieldwork and its broader relevance to their respective disciplines.

In keeping with our mandate to widen access and explore new modes of disseminating resources and ideas, workshop presentations are now available for online streaming and download through the World Oral Literature Project website.[4] Many of the chapters in this edited volume discuss audio and video recordings of oral traditions. Since a number of contributors have made use of online resources to illustrate their discussions on cultural property and traditional knowledge, it is hoped that readers will interact with this freely available media. URL links for referenced resources are included in a list of Online Sources in the reference section at the end of each chapter. All web resources were active at the time of publication unless otherwise stated.

Part I. Principles and Methods of Archiving and Conservation

Thomas Widlok's chapter discusses two aspects of digital archiving: first, he analyses what is actually involved in the process of digitisation and electronic archiving of spoken language documentation; second, he discusses notions of access and property rights in relation to the digital archives that result from such documentation. His emphasis in both cases is on identifying the elements and layers that make up the complex whole of the archive, yet he is quick to point out that there is more to this whole than is covered by his analysis. While Widlok's evaluation is based on

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4   See <http://www.oralliterature.org/research/workshops.html> [Accessed 19 November 2012].

personal experience rather than a sample of projects, he acknowledges that themes of access and property rights in digitisation remain a recurring concern. The concluding argument of his chapter is that by viewing the component parts of the process of digital archiving for just one case study, we can see some of the contradictions and ambivalences of this process in more general terms. Through such a structural analysis, we may also begin to understand the mixed feelings that some field researchers have with regard to electronic archiving and online databasing. Widlok proposes that breaking these complex processes down into their elements may help us to make informed decisions about the extent and type of digital archiving we want to engage in.

David Nathan continues with the theme of digital archiving by considering the issue of access in relation to archives that hold documents of, and documentation relating to, endangered languages. Nathan defines access as the means of finding a resource; the availability of the resource; the delivery of the resource to the user; the relevance and accessibility of resource content to the user; and the user's perceptions of their experience interacting with the archive and its resources. His discussion is centred around the Endangered Languages Archive (ELAR) and its online catalogue, both based at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London. The system uses features that have been pioneered in Web 2.0 or social networking applications, and is innovative in applying such techniques to language archiving. Nathan illustrates how ELAR's access system represents a true departure from conventional archival practices in the field of language documentation.

Nathan explains how until recently, access has been thought of as "online resource discovery through querying standardised metadata" (page 23, this volume). Where access control has been applied, it has typically been based on a formal membership criterion, such as a user account on a university's network. ELAR's goal is to provide an archive that is more closely tied to the needs of those working with endangered languages, and, of course, the needs of members of speech communities. Nathan reports on how this has emerged as a rich area of exploration, and, coupled with the rise of social networking applications and conventions over the last five years, has yielded a system that highlights the nuanced dynamics of access.

Judith Aston and Paul Matthews discuss the outcomes of a collaborative project between the authors and the Oxford-based anthropologist Wendy James. The authors report on their work with James to convert a collection

of recordings into an accessible and usable digital archive that has relevance for contemporary users. Aston and Matthews describe James' fieldwork recordings from the Blue Nile Region of the Sudan-Ethiopian borderlands, which consist of spoken memories, interviews, conversations, myths and songs. Most of the original recordings are in the Uduk language, but the collection also contains material in other minority tongues, as well as national languages. The authors highlight how this archive needs to be useful both to academics and to a wider general public, but also, and most particularly, to the people themselves who are now starting to document and recall their own experiences. It is also important that the materials contained within the archive are perceived to be part of a wider set of regional records from north-east Africa, linked to diaspora communities now living in various parts of the world.

A key issue that emerges from Aston and Matthews' collaboration with James is the need to remain true to the fluidity of oral tradition over time, in order to avoid fossilisation and misrepresentation. Their chapter recommends a conversational approach through which the archive can reveal the interactions and silences of informants, both in conversation with each other and with the ethnographer, at different historical periods. In developing such an approach, the authors hope that future users of the archive will be offered an opportunity to enter a sensory-rich world of experiences, one which foregrounds the awareness and agency of the people themselves and allows their voices to be heard in their vernacular language wherever possible.

Part II: Engagements and Reflections from the Field

Merolla, Ameka and Dorvlo open this volume's collection of field reports with a discussion of the scientific and ethical problems regarding the selection, authorship and audience that they encountered during a video-documentation research project on Ewe oral literature in south-eastern Ghana. Their documentation is based on an interview that Dorvlo and Merolla recorded in Accra in 2007. This interview concerns Ewe migration stories and is included in Merolla and Leiden University's Verba Africana series that includes videos of African oral genres with translations and interpretive commentaries informed by scientific research. The authors illustrate how the documentation and investigation of African

oral genres is still largely based on materials provided in written form, although nowadays it is largely accepted that collecting and analysing printed transcriptions and translations only gives a faint portrait of oral poems and tales and their literary and social functions.

This chapter offers an insight into the difficulties of selecting video documentation on Ewe migration stories that is suitable to be presented to a broad audience of academics, students, a public interested in African oral genres, and those involved with cultural issues or invested in specific linguistic traditions. Merolla, Ameka and Dorvlo also enter into a larger debate that is active in all disciplines in which fieldwork is a central activity: the relationship between researchers and the researched, and the locus of responsibility for what is produced and published. The authors conclude by reflecting on the yet harder questions of ownership that arise when scholars make use of audio-visual media and when the final video document is available on the Internet. They offer elegant solutions by considering individual as well as collective indigenous peoples' rights, and advocate for stronger collaborations between researchers, performers and audience. The authors conclude by demonstrating how their own research strategies have resulted in culturally significant video documents that offer a contemporary snapshot of local knowledge.

Margaret Field's account focuses on the importance of American Indian oral literature for cultural identity and language revitalisation, demonstrated through the analysis of a trickster tale. Taking the position that oral literature such as narrative and song often serve as important cultural resources that retain and reinforce cultural values and group identity, Field demonstrates how American Indian trickster tales—like Aesop's fables found in Europe—contain moral content, and are typically aimed at child audiences. In this chapter, Field discusses an example of this genre with specific reference to the Kumeyaay community of Baja California, Mexico. She also describes how such stories are an important form of cultural property that index group identity: once through the code that is used, and then again through the content of the narrative itself. Field demonstrates how oral traditions such as trickster tales form an important body of knowledge that not only preserves cultural values and philosophical orientations, but also continues to instill these values in listeners.

Considering the uses of her own fieldwork, Field explains that American Indian communities typically view their oral traditions as communal

intellectual property. It is therefore incumbent upon researchers who work with traditional texts in oral communities to collaborate to ensure that collected texts are treated in a manner that is appropriate from the perspective of the communities of origin. Field reminds us that it is essential for researchers to bear in mind the relationship between the recording, publication, and archiving of oral literature, community preferences regarding these aspects of research, and considerations relating to language revitalisation. Her message is particularly relevant today in light of the wide availability of multimedia and the ever-expanding capabilities for the archiving of oral literature. Through technological advancements, such recordings may be more available than ever in a range of formats (audio and video in addition to print), and ever more important (and political), as indigenous languages become increasingly endangered. Field concludes by demonstrating how her research materials were repatriated to the Kumayaay community in the form of educational resources and as reminders of cultural identity.

Jorge Gómez Rendón continues the discussion on revitalisation practices in the cultural heritage sector through his account of orality and literacy among indigenous cultures in Ecuador, paying close attention to contextual political factors and challenges. While Ecuador is the smallest of the Andean nations, it is linguistically highly diverse. Rendón explains that education programmes have not yet produced written forms of indigenous languages in Ecuador, which are now critically endangered. However, a resurgence of ethnic pride combined with increasing interest shown by governmental agencies in the safeguarding of cultural diversity are bringing native languages and oral practices to the foreground. This greater visibility is opening up new ways for linguistic identities to be politically managed.

After a review of the relative vitality of Ecuadorian indigenous languages and an evaluation of twenty years of intercultural bilingual education, Rendón focuses on two alternative approaches to orality in the fields of bilingual education and intangible cultural heritage. In discussing these two approaches, he addresses several ethical and legal issues concerning property rights, the dissemination of documentation outcomes, and the appropriation of intangible cultural heritage for the improvement of indigenous education. He provides a preliminary exploration into best practices in the archiving and management of digital materials for educational and cultural purposes in community contexts, through which Rendón proposes a "new model of intercultural bilingual education" and

"safeguarding of intangible heritage […] respecting [performers'] property rights from a collective rather than individual perspective" (page 79, this volume) with the aim of ensuring the survival of endangered languages and cultures.

Madan Meena's field report is based on his archiving experiences as a grantee of the World Oral Literature Project's fieldwork grants scheme. His focal recording was made in Thikarda village in south-eastern Rajasthan—a region locally known as Hadoti—and was performed in the Hadoti language in a distinct singing style. Geographically, the area is very large (24,923 square kilometers), and there are many variations in the style of performance. Meena offers an account of his experience recording the twenty-hour Hadoti ballad of Tejaji, describing the challenges he faced in capturing the entire ballad in a manner that was as authentic as possible. Meena reports how, in the past, the ballad could only be performed at a shrine in response to a snake bite. Increasingly, however, as the belief systems behind the ballad are being challenged by education and Western medical techniques of treating snake bites, the ballad is becoming divorced from its religious roots and evolving into a distinct musical tradition of its own that can be performed at festivals for entertainment value. Meena describes the use of the project's resultant digital recordings by community members to popularise their traditional performances, using MP3 players and mobile phone handsets to listen to recordings. He reflects on the invaluable nature of digital technology in preserving oral cultures, alongside the threats posed by these same technological developments to more traditional performance of oral traditions.

In the final field report of this volume, Ha Mingzong, Ha Mingzhu and Charles K. Stuart describe their research on the Mongghul (Monguor, Tu) Ha Clan oral history tradition in Qinghai and Gansu provinces, China. The authors provide historical details on the Mongghul ethnic group, and justify the urgency of their fieldwork to record and preserve the cultural heritage and historical knowledge of Mongghul elders. As well as knowing a rich repertoire of songs, folktales and cultural expressions, these elders are the "last group able to repeat generationally transmitted knowledge about clan origins, migration routes, settlement areas, important local figures, […] clan genealogy, […], modes of livelihood, [and] relationships local people had with government" (page 94, this volume). Recognition is given to the importance of documenting such knowledge for the future benefit of younger generations.

Mingzong, Mingzhu and Stuart describe their method of recording interviews about family stories told by community members. Local reactions to their recording methods are explained, with the assurance that the fieldworkers were met with hospitality and a shared sense of the importance of the documentation from older community members, despite an initially indifferent attitude from younger members of the community. The authors provide examples of their transcriptions of interviews and demonstrate how the return of digital versions of the recordings to the community has strengthened the sense of clan unity and belonging.

Openness, access and connectivity

As editors of this volume, we are delighted to bring together these important contributions that reflect on the ethical practices of anthropological and linguistic fieldwork, digital archiving, and the repatriation of cultural materials. We believe that the widest possible dissemination of such work will help support the propagation of best practices to all who work in these fields. The open access publishing model practiced by our partners in this series, the Cambridge-based Open Book Publishers, is designed to ensure that these chapters are widely and freely accessible for years to come, on a range of different publishing platforms.

Open Book Publishers are experimental and innovative, changing the nature of the traditional academic book: publishing in hardback, paperback, PDF and e-book editions, but also offering a free online edition that can be read via their website.[5] Their commitment to open access dovetails with our Project's mandate to widen the dissemination of knowledge, ideas, and access to cultural traditions. Connecting with a broader audience—one that was historically disenfranchised by the exclusivity of print and the restrictive distribution networks that favoured Western readers—allows the protection of cultural knowledge. This is achieved through a better understanding of human diversity, and the return of digitised collections to source communities and countries of origin. The chapters in this volume help us to understand each stage of this journey, from building cooperative relationships with community representatives in the field, designing and using digital tools for cultural documentation, through to the ethical and

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5   See <http://www.openbookpublishers.com/> [Accessed 22 April 2013].

practical considerations involved in building access models for digital archives.

When Edward Morgan Forster ended his 1910 novel *Howards End* with the powerful epigraph "Only connect..." he could not have imagined how this exhortation would resonate with generations to come and how its meaning would change.[6] For our purposes, both in this edited collection and in our work more generally in the World Oral Literature Project, "only connect" has a powerful, double meaning. First, and perhaps overwhelmingly for young audiences and readers, it implies that one is on the path to being digitally hooked up, wired (although in an increasingly wireless world, even the term "wired" is antiquated), and ready to participate in a virtual, online conversation. Since most of our transactions and communications in the Project are digital—through email, websites, voice-over Internet Protocol, and file share applications—"only connect" reflects our fast changing world and new work practices. Second, and perhaps more profoundly, "only connect" is what we hope to achieve when we share recordings of oral literature in print, on air and online. Connectivity is all: our project would not exist without the technical underpinnings and the philosophical imperative to see information and knowledge shared. We hope that you enjoy reading this volume as much as we have enjoyed editing it and that you will, quite simply, connect.

Cambridge, November 2012

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6   Published in London by Edward Arnold.