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Re-sounding the Spirits of Altaian Oral Epic Performance: *Kai* throat-singing and its repercussions

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1. Introduction

This paper, which focuses on the ‘spirits’ and force of oral epic performance, is based on my fieldwork in the Republic of Altai, also called ‘Mountain’ or Gorny-Altai, which lies in southern Siberia within the Russian Federation.¹ The Altai-Sayan mountains, which also embrace the republics of Tyva and Khakassia in southern Siberia and run down through West Mongolia, form the cradle of throat-singing, a remarkable vocal technique in which richly textured harmonic clusters are manipulated by a single vocalist to create more than one simultaneous sound. Most spectacular is the style that separates upper harmonics from the encompassing drone and creates a separate melody with them. This style contributed to Tyvan and Mongolian throat-singing² becoming sonic icons of the imagined ‘other’, musical commodities circulating in global space along with other icons, such as the Central African pygmy yodel, Amerindian pan-pipes and Australian didgeridoo (Pegg 2001: 295). The style of deep guttural Altaian *kai* throat-singing, essential to ritual oral epic performance, is less well-known.³ Here, I argue that *kai* is performative action that re-situates or re-negotiates the performer’s social place in local, global and spiritual worlds. The Altaian oral epic-teller uses a range of vocal sounds in performance – rhythmic verses, expressive use of the everyday speaking voice, different song genres, cries and exclamations – as

¹ Since 2002, I have worked with indigenous peoples of the Altai-Sayan Mountains in the Russian Federation. That research followed more than 15 years working on the performance of identities in music and dance of Mongolia, including the Mongolian Altai (Pegg 2001). I wish to thank the Economic and Social Research Council and the British Council for funding the research on which the data presented in this paper are based. I will be developing this topic as part of the World Oral Literature Project.

² Mongols and Tyvans call throat-singing *khöömii* and *khömei* respectively and do not use it in epic performance. In Khakassia, it is called *khai* and is used in heroic epic performance. When used in epic performance by Altai Urianghais in West Mongolia, it is called *häälah* (Khalkha *hailah*).

³ *Kai* is also used by contemporary Altaian musicians as a generic term for throat-singing, which includes several styles.

well as instrumental passages and motifs. It is, however, *kai* throat-singing that is indispensable for the efficacy of spirit-charged epic performance.

Since the early nineteenth century, much attention has been given to secular aspects of epic-telling, with emphasis placed on epics as poetry or literature adapted with textual exegesis for printed dissemination, particularly during the Soviet period when spiritual dimensions were not tolerated.⁴ It was much safer for Russian and native scholars to concentrate on linguistic, stylistic and structural aspects of the epic, its underlying ‘mental text’ and principles of transmission, than the spiritual or ritual aspects of epic performance. During that time, then, textual preservation of Altaian epic texts was undertaken. Researchers from the Altaian Institute of Language and Literature (now the Institute for Altaic Studies) in the capital of the Altai Republic, Gorno-Altai, brought epic-tellers to their institution, where they recorded and questioned them, later translating the texts into Russian and providing commentaries on the published text. Repeated over decades, this process allowed detailed textual comparisons documenting similarities, additions, improvisations and changes in performances of a single epic by the same epic-teller over time and elucidated the transmission process (Gatsak, Kazagacheva and Kataashev et al 1997). Through such textual analyses, we are able to understand the performer’s linguistic creativity, together with the ‘worlds’ experienced by himself and his audience during the performance.

In the cause of balance, this paper draws attention to the under-researched perspective of the power of the spirit-charged epic-teller. After briefly introducing the landscape, peoples and languages of Altai, I consider both the traditional *kai* performance complex and a contemporary re-sounding of the last ‘with spirit’ Altaian oral epic-teller, ‘Elbek’ Kalkin. Finally, I debate some of the issues arising from transferring performative experiences in the field to archival digital documents and how the World Oral Literature Project might embrace not only the preservation of endangered oral literatures, but the development and re-vitalisation of living aspects of oral literature, thereby accommodating its various ‘spirits’.

⁴ Nineteenth-century collectors of Altaian epic texts include the Turkologist F.W. Radloff / V.V. Radlov (1837-1918), the Russian missionary V.I. Verbitskii (1827-1890) and the Russian scholar G.N. Potanin (1835-1920). Early Altaian scholars include the composer and ethnographer A.V. Anokhin (1869-1931) and the poet P.V. Kuchiyak (1897-1943). Similarly, early Western scholars sought to understand the production of content through textual analysis and identification of oral formulae (Lord 1960, Parry 1971).

2. Landscape, peoples and languages

The landscape of the Republic of Altai changes dramatically from north to south. In the northern part, softly rounded hills with thick taiga forests conceal nestling lakes, including Lake Teletskoye, locally called ‘Altyn Köl’ or ‘Golden Lake’, the second largest freshwater lake in the world after Lake Baikal. In the south, these hills become glacial mountains with high plateaux and river valleys that cut deep.

Prior to the Soviet period (1917-1990), this area was home to nomadic tribes and clans that throughout history belonged to different states and empires. For instance, there was a Turkic period under the Kyrgyz (7-9AD), Chinggis Khan’s Mongolian Khanate (1206-1368) and the Jungar State of the West Mongolian Oirats (1630-late 1750s). After the fall of the Jungar State to the Chinese Qing Dynasty, thousands of Oirots (Jungars, West Mongolians) escaped genocide by fleeing northwards to the southern Siberian Altai and requesting annexation by Russia. Daily interactions with Mongolia, however, continued for the inhabitants of the high Altaian valleys and after the communist revolution, the current Republic was initially called the Oirot Autonomous District (R. *Oirotskaya Avtonomnaya Oblast’*). From 1948-1990, it became the Gorno-Altai Autonomous District (R. *Gorno-Altaiiskaya Avtonomnaya Oblast’*), within the Altai Region (R. *Altaiiski Krai*), a large administrative unit of the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic. The Republic of Altai was established in 1991.

Soviet researchers divided the indigenous Altaian tribes according to language, religious belief and material culture. Classifying them all as Turkic-speaking, they distinguished two groups: a northern group consisting of Tubalars, Chalkans and Kumandus, who were descended from ancient Turkic tribes, spoke languages based on ancient Uighur dialects (Baskakov 2005 [1947]) and engaged in hunter-gathering and fishing; and a southern group consisting of Altai-Kizhis, Telengits, Tölös and Teleuts, who were descendants of ancient Altai-Sayan Turkic and Mongolian tribes, whose languages belonged to the Kyrgyz-Kypchak group and were pastoralists.

Contemporary pan-Turkic nationalists embrace the Turkic-speaking hypothesis and look to the Altai Mountains as their *Urheimat*. But, as suggested by the above brief historical outline, this is not as clear-cut as they might like. Some tribes appear to have adopted Turkic rather late in their histories. It has been argued, for instance, that the Kumandus and Chalkans are Uralic rather than Turko-Mongol. Moreover, the Altaian language family theory, which in micro form comprises Turkic, Mongolic, and Tungusic (Ramstedt 1952, 1957, 1966; Poppe 1960) and in macro form, Korean and Japanese (Starostin et al 2003, Blažek 2006, Robbeets 2007), gives equal weight to the indigeneity of a number of languages to this area. Languages

were also changed in the cause of ideology and politics as well as through culture contact and individual strategizing.

A national identity – Altaian – was created during the Soviet period, together with a national ‘literary’ language based on that of the Altai Kizhis. The creation of literary languages was part of the nationalities policy across the former Soviet Union and, usually based on that of one former tribe or ethnic group, is the source of much contemporary contestation and debate. Indigenous peoples in the neighbouring Republic of Khakassia, for instance, point out that they would not use the ethnonym ‘Khakas’ since in their languages a consonant would never occur in the middle of a word.

Oral traditions differ among northern and southern Altaians: the former tell legends and short stories, whereas the latter perform heroic epics (Potapov 1969). Here, I look only at the epic-telling of one member of one of those southern tribes, the Telengits, who refer to themselves as ‘mountain people.’ Telengits live mostly in the contemporary mountainous districts of Ulagan and Kosh Agach in the eastern and south-eastern parts of the Republic, which border with Mongolia.⁵ Telengit Elbek Kalkin, the only remaining *eelü kaichy* ‘with spirit’ epic-teller in the Republic, is the son of the renowned epic-teller Aleksei Grigor’evich Kalkin (1925-1998), who moved to live among the pastoralist Altai Kizhis on the lower ground of Central Altai. Elbek now lives in his father’s old house in Yabogan, Ust’-Kan district, which he has converted into a museum.

3. Kai and its ritual performance complex

Heroic epics are vital to contemporary Altaian culture and identity. Traditionally the expression ‘to perform *kai*’ (Alt. *kailar*) refers to a performance complex that includes the epic-teller and vocal tone, the epic story and words, the event and its purpose, and the accompanying instrument and music. Such is its importance that the Altaian term for an epic-teller is *kaichy*: a ‘*kai* person.’ Importantly, when an epic-teller is *eelü* or ‘with spirit’, each aspect of the *kai* performance complex has its own ‘master-spirit’ or *ee*, a concept found widely throughout Inner Asia. Let us briefly consider each element of the performance context.

⁵ Telengits were included in the list of ‘Small-numbered Indigenous Peoples of the Russian Federation’ (Russian: *Edinyi perehen’ korennnykh malochislennykh narodov Rossiiskoi Federatsii*) in 2000.

3.1 Kai tonality

In its most restricted sense, *kai* is a fat-textured guttural throat-singing style resonant with harmonics both below the fundamental tonal note ('undertones') as well as above it ('overtones'). In the late nineteenth century, Anokhin, one of the first collectors of Altaian epics, described the low voice in which bards performed as resembling 'the buzzing of a flying beetle' (Kyrgys 2008: 14). In ritual performance contexts, *kai* is particularly vital since it enables the *kaichy* to alter his state of consciousness; to travel with or as his hero across Upper, Middle and Lower Worlds as well as to peripheral and parallel worlds; and to travel in different time dimensions, in 'epic space-time' or *kai*-time. When tales are told in secular contexts, Altaians use *chörchöktör* ('to tell') rather than *kai*.

In that *kai* is never used in everyday communication, it may be considered one of Bauman's 'keys to performance', signalling a particular kind of event (1986). It serves to disguise the epic-teller's natural voice and enables communication with non-human beings. Equally significant though, is that the Altaian term *kai* also means 'to soar', 'glide by air', 'fly up or take off' (Sagalaev and Oktyabr'skaya 1990: 170), suggesting that it is by this means that the epic-teller propels himself and his hero along the *kai* space-time pathways that they need to travel during the epic's narrative. Epic-tellers have their own individual styles of *kai*.⁶

3.2 'With Spirit' epic-teller

A 'with spirit' epic-teller or *eelü kaichy* is similar to a shaman in that he is chosen by spirits and has to fulfil obligations to those spirits during the performance. His initiation – during which he receives the 'spirit of *kai*' – takes place either in a dream or at a sacred place, such as the junction of two rivers. He has extra-sensory abilities, including prediction, seeing spirits, healing and – again like a shaman – has helper-spirits that accompany him on his journeys and assist in tasks to be undertaken.

3.3 Epic tale and words

In his sound armoury, the 'with spirit' epic-teller needs not only a distinctive vocal tone but also an enlivened tale and the power of the 'word'. Both the

⁶ See Sychenko (2009: 103) for Aleksei G. Kalkin's identification and imitation of the different *kai* of individual epic-tellers.

tale and words have spirit-owners, given to the *eelü kaichy* in dreams. The spirit of Altai (*Altai eezi*), the spirit of *kai* (*kai eezi*) and the hero all listen and judge the epic performance. According to Elbek Kalkin's wife, Mariya Erteevna, they ask: 'Is this correct *kai* or not? And if there is one incorrect moment, the *kaichy* will be punished.' Mariya explained that an epic heroine had punished Elbek in a dream for having described her as 'having an odd nose' (interview 2002). It is the *ee* spirit who 'brings in the words' and these must be followed faithfully. They are channelled through the epic-teller by the spirit and sometimes include archaic words that the performer does not understand.

3.4 Instrument as steed and helper

Among Altaians, the two-stringed *topshuur* lute is used to accompany epics. This instrument is enlivened by an *alkysh* blessing and initially becomes an animal on which the epic-teller rides. Traditionally, the face (sounding board) and strings are made from the hide and gut of the animal that is its master-spirit. The animated instrument is addressed and offered food and drink before the performance. As the epic-teller's helper-spirit, it shape-changes during the journey, even into inanimate objects, when required to overcome obstacles. Elbek (Interview 2002) put it this way:

The *topshuur* can protect [a person] from bad spirits. It has an *ee*. It's a helper-spirit. The *kaichy* visits the Underworld and the Upper World, depending on the story. When the *kaichy* crosses a river, the *topshuur* is a boat; when he goes through mountains, it's a horse. You can't be a *kaichy* without a *topshuur*.

3.5 Event & purpose

The Altaian *eelü kaichy* will only perform during the waxing moon because bad spirits are believed to be abroad when the moon is waning and this makes his task more difficult. Traditionally, he is needed twice a year after the equinox to turn the seasons, moving nature onwards. It is especially necessary to 'call' the Spring because Winter is difficult. He also performs before the hunt as an offering in reciprocation for game (the master-spirit's domestic animal) to be taken.

It is within the *kaichy*'s power to restore harmony between human and supernatural energies, thereby bringing balance to both cosmos and society. The *kaichy* and his hero may have to re-establish the presence of major heavenly constellations or stop battles between gods of the Upper World and bad spirits of the Lower World. In order to restore equilibrium, the epic must be correctly executed and end well so that the hero and all other epic

characters (especially bad spirits), the spirit of the *topshuur* lute and the epic performer himself can go back peacefully to their own ‘places.’ The epic-teller, his enlivened instrument, the epic hero and the spirit of the epic must all be in agreement that it is time to end the epic. By participating in dramas in alternative worlds, the epic-teller also re-orders his audience’s experience of ‘being-in-the world’, recreating social wellbeing in the Middle World.

4. Re-sounding the spirits

4.1 Elbek Kalkin

Elbek (Albert) Alekseevich Kalkin (b. 1953) is from an unbroken patrilineal line of Telengit oral epic-tellers (*kaichy*). Elbek’s great-grandfathers were well-known *kaichys*. Most famous, though, was his father, Aleksei Grigor’evich, mentioned above. Born in Ulagan *aimak* in the then-Altai Autonomous District of the Soviet Union, his father was renowned for his huge epic memory. By 22 years old, he could perform 30 epics, including perhaps the most well known, Maadai-Kara (Marazzi 1986), which has 7,738 verses, each seven lines long (Gatsak *et al* 1997). A.G. Kalkin is said to have reached three worlds during epic performance and refused to talk about certain sections of his epics, which he considered to be sacred. Despite the constraint of becoming a ‘national artist’ during the secular Soviet period, A.G. Kalkin remained a ‘with spirit’ or *eelü kaichy*, performing in secret.

In 2002, I worked with his son Elbek in Ongudai village, Central Altai, and in 2006 we travelled together and met at various festivals. When I asked Elbek if I could document his performance by video, he chose to be recorded in his father’s house Museum. The situation of the epic-teller had changed. This was not the pre-Soviet period of the traditional ritual *kai* performance complex or the secularised Soviet era, when epic-tellers performed on stages and ritual performances went to ground. In this post-Soviet period, Elbek chose how to frame his performance event in order to deliver messages about himself, his culture and sociality. Instead of his local community, the audience for this performance consisted of his own family and me, a foreign researcher with my Altaian team. He also brought into the company his ancestors and the spirit of Altai. Knowing that potential audiences would not understand the traditional interplay of word- and sound-power, occasion, belief and tradition, Elbek used other means to transmit information he felt necessary to his re-soundings.

First, he framed the event visually within his Telengit family tradition by situating himself before an oil painting of his *eelü kaichy* father Aleksei Gregor’evich playing the *topshuur*, as well as in front of his father’s actual

instrument and gown. Second, he continued this connection to his father in rendition of the epic *Maadai Kara*, his use of *kai*, grave demeanour peculiar to epic performance and use of the *topshuur* lute. Third, he connected to Telengits through his use of Telengit archaisms and language (and performance practices inherited from his father). And fourth, he further situated himself by connecting to a range of different kinds of spirits. As in traditional contexts, he invited the spirit of Altai by performing an *alkysh*, again accompanied by *topshuur*, as a prelude to the epic. After strumming an instrumental introduction in 4/4 time with the stress on the first and third beats, he sang:

Ah hooooooooo
 Covered with cedar,
 Washed with silver snow,
 My precious Master-Altai,
 My powerful Umbilical-Altai.

By the tree with one base,
 May a young goat and hare live,
 By the two trees with one base,
 May a roe buck and lamb pasture,
 My precious Master-Altai,
 My powerful Umbilical-Altai.

May [we] sleep on your breast,
 Tucked under your armpit,
 My precious Master-Altai,
 My powerful Umbilical-Altai.

In Altaian, Elbek uses initial alliteration as well as parallelism in each pair of lines and within a line. The first verse, for instance, is as follows:

Mösh agazhyn jabyn jadar,
Möngkü karla junun jadar,
Erjinelü Bii-Altaiym,
Erketendü Kin-Altaiym.

In performance, Elbek also connected to his current place and time. He had learnt this epic from both his father's performances and from written texts produced in the Soviet period in the literary language. Unlike his father, who had played a *topshuur* with a skin face, designed to produce small sounds to connect to a small community, Elbek's *topshuur* had a wooden face, which is more fitting to larger audiences, such as the festivals introduced in the Soviet period, and less prone to go out of tune. His use of Altai Kizhi words embedded him among pastoralist Altai Kizhi people where he now lives, rather than among his natal mountain Telengits. His father's move thus affected the language Elbek uses in his heroic epics. Drawing these performative dimensions together in one videoed performance event in a post-Soviet era, Elbek re-sounded his spirits aware that he and they would be reaching out into a global world.

5. Performative force, archival spirits

I have shown how 'spirits' are vital to indigenous oral epic performance in Mountain Altai and briefly illustrated how, in a traditional local and a contemporary situation, those spirits are sounded and re-sounded. In traditional contexts, access to spirits helped to re-balance relations with humans, nature and unseen dimensions, enabling recreation of identities for those involved, a vital part of their sense of place. In the post-Soviet period, Elbek Kalkin used vocal tone, words and instrumental sounds and his own framing of the event to re-connect with his ancestral kin, natal tribe and local spirits to express his current place (in Altai) and potential 'place' among foreigners in an unknown land. At a time when Altaian traditions and identities are under renewed threat as a process of Russification and centralisation to Moscow intensifies, international recognition of Altaian traditions and identities is important to him. How, though, do we set about re-sounding those spirits for him in our own very different environments? How do we avoid reducing sounds that connect to history and tradition, spiritual and cosmological beliefs, contemporary social relations and place to a potentially isolated bounded written text or recording? The answer lies partly in fieldwork and post-fieldwork methodologies and partly on how initiatives such as the World Oral Literature Project develop.

5.1 Fieldwork and post-fieldwork methodologies

Fieldwork methodology increasingly uses multimedia technology to capture the performative force or 'spirit' of orality and its multimodal performance. It is clear from the importance of *kai* throat-singing to the efficacy of epic performance that sound recordings are essential to documentation of this

particular oral literature. Alan Macfarlane made an eloquent plea during the December 2009 World Oral Literature Project workshop for documentation by video, rather than simply recording the sound. Neither methodology is problem free.

I have long argued that whether performances are on stage or in more traditional contexts, the processes are the same. It is not a question of authenticity but rather how the performer (re)creates self and personhood by connecting in performance with other individuals, as well as different kinds of ethnic, religious, social and political groups, terrestrial and cosmic landscapes, spirits and gods (Pegg 2001). Recording *in vivo* is often complicated. For instance, as Michael Oppitz pointed out during the workshop, capturing clear vocals from a dancing shaman or a large unscripted ritual can be difficult to achieve. However, we need to also remain aware that to decontextualise and recontextualise a performance or text is an act of control and much is lost if performers are whisked off to be recorded *in vitro* in the name of quality and clarity. A potential third way is to encourage the performer to choose the frame in which the performance will take place, as demonstrated above. Frames provide a setting in which society can be questioned, shaped and transformed (Goffman 1974, Bauman 1986) and identities re-created. We saw how Elbek's own choice enabled our understanding of his connections to the past and relevance to the present as well as the emergent properties of his performance. It also needs recognizing, though, that frames shift once a video film is completed, because the possibility of subsequent audiences is introduced. Once recorded, there is a risk that the performance becomes a bounded self-contained object separable from the social and cultural contexts of production and reception. The digital document may be fixed whereas a performed text is flexible, partially improvised and emergent within the event.

A word should be said about the quality of our archival recordings of rare and endangered oral literatures. Long experience has led me to consider the following as minimum requirements:

- (1) Back-up equipment is needed for when video or audio mechanisms freeze / overheat or for when spirits interfere.
- (2) External microphones are needed to ensure quality when recording music using consumer (rather than professional) audio and video digital recorders. Recordings will only be as good as the microphone, and internal microphones are mediocre.
- (3) Reliance on computers to free up digital copying devices in extreme environments may prove problematic.

Having recorded our performance, the next considerations are: how should it be represented in print and how should we handle the changes caused by its translation and transference from orality to another medium?

5.2 Language, Sounds and Rhythms as Performative Events

Both transferring into a written ‘literary language’, as in the Soviet period, and engaging in purely linguistic analyses not only fail to capture the spiritual dimensions and purposes of performance, but also ignore performative aspects, including idiosyncrasies of pronunciation or dialect. In both cases, the actual sounds produced by the epic-tellers are transformed into an idealised version suitable for consumption by those steeped in another cultural system. In Altaian epic performance, for instance, dialectical pronunciation is one of the sonic actions that express ethnicity. The end-blown flute is pronounced ‘*chor (choor)*’ by the Telengit epic-teller A.G. Kalkin and ‘*shoor*’ by Altai Kizhi epic-teller Chachiyakov. Moreover, voiceless consonants are preferred especially when initial. Although the text in literary language might render ‘hero’ as *baatar*, in epic performance it is more likely to be pronounced ‘*paatyr*’, thereby expressing the performer’s individual identity rather than that of the homogeneous Soviet.

Taking language as a ‘mode of action’ rather than as a ‘means of thinking’, a concept introduced by the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1923, 1965 [1935]) and later explored by ethnolinguists following the ‘speech act’ theories of Austin (1975 [1962]) and Searle (1969), is important. Baumann and Briggs’s now classic article of 1990 encompassed theories of performativity and the social construction of reality and this process, I suggest, is illustrated equally by the Soviet creation of national language and Elbek’s re-soundings.

A central concern of ethno poetics (Hymes 1981, Tedlock 1989) has been to include paralinguistic features (e.g. gestures or facial expressions) and prosodic features (e.g. rhythm, speed, intonation, pitch variation, pauses, volume, voice quality, sentence length, formulaic phrases, archaisms and onomatopoeic words) in modes of expression. Rather than using accepted literary techniques of textual analysis, Tedlock argues for traditional oral narrative as an event, emergent initially in the experience of performance and then re-emergent in its re-creation by the reader (also applicable, in our case, to audio-visual audiences in non-indigenous contexts). Although presupposing a traditional dimension, he emphasizes the uniqueness of each individual’s performance, at odds with the Parry-Lord approach of oral-formulaic theory

that privileges traditional over individual aspects of performance. For Tedlock, the 'word' is a 'unit of utterance' in a single time and place.⁷ More recently, Foley distinguishes 'word-power' within the 'enabling event' using the 'enabling referent' of tradition, suggesting that words are charged with associative values particular to the event in which they are situated. Extending interest in oral societies beyond the verbal, he also draws attention to the agency of the bard (1995: 1, 8).

In the Telengit epic-teller's performance, the rhythms of his breathing affect the sounds produced and the rhythms of textual narration. A.G. Kalkin, for instance, performed seven lines of the epic in one breath. In addition to the implications for meaning, the sounds of many phrases and words, especially final ones, become closed in accordance with breath control. Many rhythmic fillers of no meaning are also used, for example the heroine's name *Ochy Bala* becomes *Ochy la Bala* (Gatsak, Kazagacheva *et al.* 1997: 72-74). Such particles are a means of using rhythm to shape the story and much is therefore lost if these are ignored to preserve pre-conceived Western notions of metre. As Dell Hymes realised in relation to Native American narratives, it is no good recognizing most of the notes but failing to discern their intrinsic rhythm (1981: 11).

Given the importance of texts, we could perhaps ask: is there a way of augmenting our audio-visual documents by presenting texts sensitively to include performative aspects, including uses of the body? Finally, with quality recordings in the archive and texts that include performative aspects, is there something more that can be done?

6. Conclusion: living treasures, living archives

The World Oral Literature Project sets out to protect and preserve endangered oral literatures and a vital aspect of that must be its documentation. In her inspirational keynote address at the December 2009 workshop, Ruth Finnegan posed the question: what do we capture and study? While my paper has attempted to cover some of the complexities of that question, my conclusion takes a radical turn by posing a further question: can we do more than protect, preserve and capture?

The power of performance was brilliantly demonstrated at the opening of our workshop in the shamanic drumming and chanting of Yarjung Kromchhai

⁷ For a full account of how the approaches of Tedlock and Hymes differ, see Foley (1995).

Tamu of the Gurung/Tamu ethnic group of Nepal. Not only chanted text, but bodily movements and drumming added to our experience of his oral literature and to our understanding of his culture. I have used the concept of ‘spirit’ in different ways in this paper. The ‘spirits’ of oral literature are perhaps best experienced during such a multi-sensory performance event rather than the flatness of textual representation or the one-step remove of video capture. How, then, can we perpetuate these spirits?

Approaches to oral tradition, oral literature and orality differ across academic disciplines. Classicist and folklore approaches are, like the Russian and Siberian linguistic approaches described above, concerned with the identification of formulaic composition and themes (‘type-scenes’) and improvisational composition-in-performance. By contrast, anthropologists, and anthropologically-trained ethnomusicologists, understand that that the texts are created by people from within a particular life space and social world. A further approach is that held by those involved in the recording of intangible cultural heritage, most notably UNESCO and the national governments that are its member states. The UNESCO approach developed from its post-1972 programmes of protecting the world’s tangible artworks and natural environments through the creation of ‘lists.’ The ‘Masterpieces of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity’ list took effect in 2008. Once again, anthropologists challenge this orientation. Michael F. Brown (2005: 54), for instance, points out:

... if global cultural diversity is preserved on digital recording devices while the people who gave rise to this artistry and knowledge have disappeared, then efforts to preserve intangible heritage will be judged a failure.

Brown also reminds us that digital media degrade far faster than was once perceived, and that the technologies required to read them change so rapidly that within a decade or two many records are unreadable because no one possesses the obsolete equipment required to access them (2005: 48). A further question is therefore worthy of consideration: is it enough to store endangered oral literatures and cultural heritage as objects on recorded media?

The concept of ‘national living treasure’, given legal status by the Japanese in 1950, focuses on the practitioners of tradition rather than the traditional artefacts themselves and has been adopted by other countries including Australia, France, the Philippines, Romania and Thailand. Could the dimension of ‘living treasure’ or ‘living archives’ occupy a cultural space alongside our digital archives both in the field and at home? Can we help to re-vitalise as well as protect local traditions, perhaps through programmes of performances and residencies during which living oral literatures are demonstrated, taught and developed? Would this help to

'preserve the spirit' as well as the object? Of course, such heritage interventions would change the relationship of people to what they do, affecting how people understand their culture and themselves (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004: 52). In the cause of survival through re-vitalisation rather than simply collection, though, that may be a risk worth taking.

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