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Editors' Preface

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This special issue of *Language Documentation and Description* derives from presentations at the 2009 World Oral Literature Project Workshop, held on 15 and 16 December at the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (CRASSH) at the University of Cambridge. Videos of the talks are available at <http://www.oralliterature.org/research/workshops.html>. The contributions published here represent seven of the sixteen papers presented at the workshop, along with an additional paper by Roger Blench and Fredeliza Campos, whose fieldwork was funded by the World Oral Literature Project. Taken as a whole, this volume addresses some of the theoretical and practical issues related to the collection, recording, preservation and dissemination of oral literature by taking the conversation held at the workshop to a wider and more varied audience. We are grateful to Peter Austin for his suggestion that *Language Documentation and Description* might be a suitable vehicle for publishing these papers. We would also like to thank Tom Castle for his hard work on preparing this issue for publication.

Subscribers and regular readers of this journal will need no reminding of the challenges of language endangerment, and can take a small measure of comfort in the response of linguists working with the Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project (HRELP) and the Volkswagen Foundation-funded Documentation of Endangered Language (DoBeS) project, to name but two existing initiatives. To date, however, anthropologists have not offered a coordinated response to similar pressures that lead to the ever-greater homogenisation of indigenous cultures, and the forces that threaten the oral traditions of people across the globe.

For many communities around the world, the transmission of oral literature from one generation to the next lies at the heart of cultural practice. While our European epics or classics are widely published and regularly taught as literature, oral narratives have rarely had that chance and have been looked down on precisely because they are not thought to be 'literature' according to Western conventions. Yet oral literature is as complex, beautiful and sophisticated as the writings of the great published authors of Europe. Moreover, these creative works are an invaluable part of a community's heritage that may be threatened when their mother tongue becomes endangered or even lost when a language dies out, as such traditions are often

left untranslated when a community switches to speaking a more dominant language.

As Ruth Finnegan (page 13) discusses in her contribution to this volume, ‘oral literature’ is by no means an uncontested or neutral term. While it comes with considerable intellectual baggage, by taking stock of the issues involved, our choice to use it can:

[pull] us out of the cold assumption that only in written text can human imagination and wisdom be clothed, opening a door to the vast oral creativity of humankind so often devalued in the print-dominated outlook of western scholarship... To speak of ‘oral literature’ is already to widen our intellectual horizons and move us behind the limited confines of the written canon.

In its widest sense, then, ‘oral literature’ may include ritual texts, curative chants, epic poems, musical genres, folk tales, creation stories, songs, myths, spells, legends, proverbs, riddles, tongue-twisters, word games, recitations, life histories or historical narratives. Most simply, however, ‘oral literature’ refers to any form of literature that is transmitted orally.

In response to the challenges discussed above, the World Oral Literature Project (WOLP) was established in January 2009 to document and make accessible endangered oral literatures before they disappear without record. The project is based at the University of Cambridge, where it is affiliated to the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. Our primary goal is to support fieldworkers and local communities engaged in the collection and preservation of all forms of oral literature by providing funding for original research, in addition to hosting an online digital repository of contemporary and heritage recordings. When appropriate, open access has been granted to these collections through our website.

Since its foundation up to the time of publication, WOLP has disbursed more than £78,000 (\$120,000) in grants to fund eighteen time-sensitive research projects, including recordings of ceremonial chanting in the Vaupés region of Colombia, an audio archive of the vocal repertoire of the last royal singer of Mustang, Nepal, and a collection of Altaian heroic epics sung by ritual practitioners. More recently, we began to host digitised copies of these collections online as well as depositing them with local communities. At the time of going to press, our online Collections portal included audio and video content collected in Taiwan, China, Nepal and Bhutan, dating from the 1950s to the present. By early 2011, this steadily growing corpus will have expanded to include other world areas.

The study of oral literature is situated at the intersection of anthropology and linguistics and, while drawing from both – and other – disciplines, researchers must contend with challenges that are unique to this area of study. To date, there are relatively few dedicated support mechanisms for scholarship on oral literature. In response, WOLP is committed to providing a platform for discussion, collaboration and dissemination to all those working on oral literature across disciplinary and national borders. We publish collections of oral literature, in the form of our Occasional Paper series, both online and in print, and we host an Occasional Lecture series and a yearly workshop at which participants gather to share their experiences of working on endangered narrative traditions.

Our first workshop, from which the substance of this volume derives, was held in December 2009 and brought more than sixty students, linguists, anthropologists, community representatives, museum curators and archivists from all over the world to Cambridge. This being our first gathering, our goal was to discuss ethical strategies for collecting, recording, preserving and disseminating endangered oral literature. A wide range of stimulating papers were presented on the responsibilities of researchers, their engagements with local communities as partners, the place of Western universities as archival repositories of living practices and the role of digital archives and community cultural centres as sites of knowledge transfer, teaching and research. All presentations were recorded, and video podcasts of the papers are available online in a variety of media formats at <www.oralliterature.org> so that any interested party can continue to benefit from the content of the papers and resulting discussion in their own time. The workshop was made possible by generous financial support from C-SAP (the Higher Education Academy Subject Network for Sociology, Anthropology, Politics), the Onaway Trust and the Firebird Foundation for Anthropological Research.

For a number of participants, the December workshop was their first opportunity to attend an event dedicated exclusively to issues relating to oral literature research. The enthusiasm of the presenters and of the gathered audience created a lively, collaborative environment that, in turn, led to this publication. Through case studies and theoretical considerations, the eight contributions presented here address the major themes that arose during the workshop: practical concerns in studying and reproducing oral literature; techniques for facilitating collaboration between local and foreign researchers; the costs and benefits of elicited versus spontaneous performance; and evaluations of the diverse threats to oral traditions around the world.

Ruth Finnegan, who served as keynote speaker and principal discussant at our workshop, sets the scene for this publication by carefully examining the rewards and difficulties experienced by those who work on oral literature.

Finnegan's contribution commences with a nuanced unpacking of the term itself, and ventures through questions of authenticity to culminate in a discussion of the contested process of transcription. She concludes that the study of oral literature is inherently (perhaps even necessarily) complex because humans – and thus their social products – are complex, messy and fascinating beings. The complications that surround oral literature should not be viewed 'as obstacles to its study but as indicators of its rich complexity and deep human significance' (page 24).

Finnegan offers cautionary words on the process of rendering textual that which was formerly only oral, it being 'too easy when looking at the neat resultant print to forget the performed reality of the original and ignore the intervening hands and far-from-neutral social conventions that shaped the final text' (page 19). These points are further developed by Martin Gaenszle in his contribution on ceremonial wedding dialogues among the Mewahang Rai in East Nepal. Gaenszle's opening question of whether it is 'methodologically legitimate to stage a performance in order to make it more comprehensible' (page 67) is a practical challenge, and he goes on to address specific examples of elicited practice through his experiences of documenting endangered oral traditions. The reader emerges from Gaenszle's balanced discussion of *in vitro* versus *in situ* performances with an appreciation of both styles, which, when taken together, are an 'an ideal starting point for ethnographic textualising' (page 81).

In her contribution, Carole Pegg takes up the question of *in situ* versus *in vitro* documentation to offer a third option: allowing the performer to select where and how he or she will be recorded, thus providing greater context as well as additional information to the researcher, not to mention improved recording conditions. This, as Pegg puts it, is 'not a question of authenticity but rather how the performer (re)creates self and personhood' (page 134). The author explores this third way as part of her larger examination of *kai* throat-singing in the Republic of Altai, and articulates how multimedia, combined with textualisation, can assist in preserving the 'spirits' of the performances.

Sara Shneiderman addresses a theme that was repeatedly discussed throughout the workshop and one which speaks to researchers more generally, namely: what is the most ethical approach for producing a textual form of a chant, song or epic for which there is no community consensus and no single established and accepted version? In entering into this discussion, the author draws on her research documenting Thangmi oral traditions in Nepal and northern India where these issues are particularly potent. Working in a context where members of the community had differing and conflicting interests in the textualisation of these rituals, the scholarly role of creating a written version (or versions) of oral shamanic recitations is politically fraught.

Shneiderman argues that, as scholars, we must ‘fully acknowledge our own complicit roles in producing certain kinds of textual forms’ (page 159), which she does both in this publication and through the workshops which she has led with Thangmi community members. Shneiderman concludes by suggesting that the process of using non-linear, rich audio-visual recording media, locally referred to as ‘videoalisation’, may in fact provide a complement to textualisation as a means of mediating potential conflicts between oral and literate worldviews.

Gerald Roche, a grantee of the World Oral Literature Project Supplemental Grants Programme, and his seven co-authors and collaborators examine the benefits of participatory approaches to cultural documentation through the lens of their fieldwork on the Tibetan Plateau. The authors suggest that ‘participatory approaches assert that communities have the right to define their problems and negotiate appropriate solutions and that problems are most efficiently and completely addressed in this manner’ (page 149), and go on to propose that the ‘skills and knowledge of outside professionals are more easily acquired, ...the more complex and valued form of knowledge is local expertise’ (page 150). Given the high level of cultural diversity among neighbouring communities on the Plateau, the authors suggest that participatory techniques are not only more ethical and appropriate, but more effective in such research environments. While stridently worded, the authors are careful not to present an overly prescriptive methodology: ‘[w]e must be realistic about balancing community goals and providing objective documentation. To thus label our work ‘participatory’ in the fullest sense is somewhat misleading’ (page 153).

In his contribution, Michael Oppitz provides a detailed, elegant overview of the Parched Grain Chant, one modular element in the shamanic healing ritual oeuvre of the Magar of Nepal. Oppitz’s approach is at once stylistically traditional, using liturgical terminology in Latin to mark subsections of the ritual, and intellectually adventurous, humanising the ritual through the precise articulation of all of its structural parts. His contribution offers both synchronic detail and comparative breadth, concluding with a particularly helpful reflection on the scholarly study of parallelism and verse structure.

Peter Austin examines the endangered and poorly documented tradition of lontar reading among the Sasak of Lombok, Indonesia. After describing the historical and linguistic context in which the literary tradition of writing on the dried leaves of the lontar palm arose, Austin goes on to offer one of the first published accounts of the performance of actually reading the lontars (*pepaòsan*). Lontar texts are highly elliptical and poetic and their interpretation must be taught, and there is increasing evidence to suggest that both the actual manuscripts and the performance tradition are now under

threat. Austin concludes that there is an urgent need for a professional study of these now endangered practices.

Through a discussion of the oral genres of the Ifugao in the northern Philippines, Roger Blench and Fredeliza Campos also examine the broader issue of researchers recording traditions ‘where its performers are now embedded in contexts very different from those in which this repertoire evolved’ (page 50). In the case of the Ifugao, this realignment is in part the result of cultural revival movements driven by the urban elite and additionally a consequence of the national School of Living Tradition (SLT) scheme that, the authors argue, has had a lasting impact on how performers dress, what instruments they use, the amount of compensation they require and the length of the performance. Blench and Campos take the position that while this reinvented tradition may in time become a new tradition, and that modernisers may suggest that such a reinvention is simply part of the evolution of a tradition, it nevertheless remains imperative to make recordings of ‘older, richer performance styles grounded in the community’ (page 61) or risk ‘betray[ing] the generations of performers who evolved the diverse styles that have survived up to the present’ (page 61).

The issues of authenticity in performance, and the relationships between orality and textuality, and modern and traditional forms of cultural production run throughout this issue of *Language Documentation and Description* as strong, guiding themes. We would do well to recall Ruth Finnegan’s (page 23) compelling statement in her introduction to this volume:

By now we are sceptical about the idea of fixed, ‘pure’ or ‘uncontaminated’ tradition untouched by human interaction and active processing, and have to accept that those who perform, record, inscribe, edit and translate at any given period also have a part in the process by which some product attains wider distribution or preservation. The important thing is no doubt to be open about how particular cases were recorded and uttered, and what parties were involved in their processing, and not to peddle them as something which they are not.

As editors of this collection, we are delighted to have the opportunity to bring together these rich and diverse contributions under the roof of this publication. We hope that you will enjoy reading these papers as much as we have enjoyed compiling them.

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