On Memory: Processes and Supports

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This issue of *Folklife* is a brief presentation of French research in South Asia. In order to explore new data and insights, on the basis of a comparative approach and scholarly debates, since 2001, an interdisciplinary seminar « Processes and Supports of Social Memory », has been launched at the Centre André-Georges Haurdricourt (C.N.R.S) and at the Centre de recherche sur l’Oralité (CRO) Institut des Langues et Civilisations Orientales (INALCO), in Paris. It brings together the disciplines of anthropology and linguistics, ethnopoetics and ethnomusicology, history of religion and history.

Long sung or spoken narratives, often linked to rituals, are presented irrespective of whether they belong to societies with a living oral tradition or societies with a mixed oral and written tradition, as in the case of India.

This shows an amazing variety of Speech Arts and their power, transformations in form and in semantic content. Our aim is to safeguard, analyse and comprehend, from the native view, this Intangible Heritage of oral traditions and expressions.

According to the various Traditions, the singer of tales composes a narrative following either fixed or changing “paths”, as he performs. Brining to surface the “landmarks” of such paths and the mnemonic devices at work in the miscellaneous expressions of oral composition, is one of our aims. Some cultures set in motion mnemonic devices extremely rigid: memory is exclusively attentive to the signifier and training is based upon the following: strategies guiding musical, kinesic, and plastic expressions. Articulation, syllabic permutations and plaits, mastery of voice in melody, timbre, modulation and ornamentation, this type of transmission is one of the most essential know-how and mastery of composition. Transmission processes are equally studied: face paintings and costumes, theatres of actors, shadow plays and puppetry, all forms of creativity related to theatre and the performing Arts.

Attention shall also be lent to visual tangible supports such as chapbooks (*patthi*) and graphism, either on paper, cloth (*patua; par*), shell, wood, bamboo, or *lontara* (Palmyr palm), as found in many cultures of South Asia, continental and islands of Southeast Asia. Other iconic supports are equally studied: face paintings and costumes, theatres of actors, shadow plays and puppetry, all forms of creativity related to theatre and the performing Arts. These actions and multimodal experiences take place during performances—a privileged moment to capture and bring to light mnemonic devices, transmissions of know-how and mastery of composition. Music, kinesic, and plastic expressions are necessarily part of these compositions. Transmission processes are based upon the following: strategies guiding musical, vocal, narrative, discursive and praxemic actions and expressions; training by silent, non verbalised
showing techniques; training with explicit teaching (comments, treaties); respect for the Word, respect for the Master, respect for the Book, stimulate mimetic actions, faithful reiteration, yet creation. As far as the translation is concerned, it has to be particularly accurate, aiming at rendering a relevant, interpretative synthesis of the various symbolic forms and practices. Simultaneously, searching for concrete/abstract manifestations of mental processes at work is undertaken. As the analysis develops, places and events that structure the experience of Temporality of the respective groups, are taken into account and analysed.

History of this Research
In a certain way, this seminar of research is a continuation of a Seminar on: “Literature of Voice: Epics” that I conducted, with the assistance of C. Champion Servan-Schreiber, from 1991 to 2000 at the CRO. This was one of five international seminars, integrated to the “Integral Study of Silk Roads: Roads of Dialogue”, a vast program of UNESCO which was part of the Decade for Cultural Development (1988-1998).

In the year 1990, I launched the project on in a seminar jointly organised by INTACH, Archaeological Survey of India and UNESCO in chennai.

In 1992, a conference launched the five integrated seminar programs in Paris: “Les Routes de la Soie: Problèmes scientifiques et culturels”.

As far as the seminar on “Epics” was concerned, several international workshops took place in various countries of Europe and Asia.

In Europe: The first one, “Epics Along the Silk Roads”, was convened by Lauri Honko in Turku and focused on the notion of “mental text” (1992). The contributions were published later as a special issue of “Oral Tradition” at the Center for Studies in Oral Tradition, University of Missouri-Columbia. The Folklore Fellows’ Summer Schools then developed. The second one was convened in Boon by Walter Heissig (1992) on “Ethnography and Oral Tradition”, followed by a third one in Sankt Augustin (1994), organised by Walter Heissig and Rudiger Schott on:“Oral Tradition: Their Preservation, Publication and Indexing”. The next was convened by Karl Reichl near Bonn on: “Epics: Performance and Music” (1997).


Dr. Pitiphat convened another workshop in Bangkok on “Thais Épics”.

A Conference in Ateneo de Manila University took place during the French Spring 2000 in Manila: Literature of Voice: Epics in the Philippines”, as the Philippines Oral Epics Archives were launched. Last January 2006, a panel on: “Epics in the Austronesian World” was convened during the 10th International Conference on Austronesian Languages (10ICAL) which took place, this time, in Palawan, Philippines: (http://www.sil.org/asia/philippines/ical.html). Proceedings of most workshops and panels on “Epics” have been published on various types of supports in the respective countries of South and Southeast Asia, besides the publications of the very texts by the scholars themselves.

In France: Long chanted narrative is approached as a score; the analysis focuses on the multilayered relationships, at the narrative, semantic, poetical, vocal and musical levels (rhythms, melodies, timbres), as well as at the praxemic level (motions, movements, gestures), contextual and historical levels.

A special issue of Diogènes, The International Journal in Human Sciences, n°181, “Épopées: Littératures de la voix”, was edited and published in 1998, presenting some of the contributions to the seminar at CRO. Besides, three typescripts of a number of papers along the years were edited in collaboration with C. Champion Servan-Schreiber for the members of the seminar:

-1993-1994: “Interaction oral-écrit: Modes de composition ; Modes de transmission lors de la performance; Modes de transcription”, (87p.)

A special issue of Purusartha:” Traditions orales dans le monde indien,”

(24 papers) was coordinated and published in 1996, by C. Champion Servan-Schreiber at Centre d’Études de l’Inde et de l’Asie du Sud, (CEIAS).

On May 7 th 1997 at Maison des Sciences de l’Homme (MSH) in Paris, a round table conference bringing together three seminars, was held by J.L Racine, F. Mallison, C. Servan-Schreiber and myself on: “ Regards croisés (II): Figures emblématiques, identités, oralité”.


During the last Conference on “Réseau Asie 2”, held in Paris, September 2005, a panel on: “Processus et supports de la mémoire: Savoirs et savoir-faire rituels II”, exemplified French research in Asia, (on line: (http://www.reseau-asie.com) and in press. The papers in the present issue of Folklife are offering a more extensive, although limited, insight into the French research in India.
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