

## C o m m e n t s

# MENTAL TEXT

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In one sense, the idea of a mental text is not new to contemporary scholarship on India's oral epic traditions. One of the things that makes India such a marvelous place to study oral epics is that one can trace their numerous thematic threads through a vast network of intertextual linkages, and through every conceivable performance context, both within a given tradition and between them. My own research on a Tulu oral epic tradition called *paddana* revealed to me some of the subtle kinds of links village traditions entail. The Tulu epics are at once both a macro-genre and a performance tradition. That is, within the genre there are not only a number of distinct stories, but many of the stories exist in context-sensitive variants. Furthermore, the stories and their variants make frequent intertextual reference to one another. Contemplating the relationship between distinct, named epic traditions in Tulunad, it became clear to me that there was a larger *epic* which "exists in the minds of the performers and audience," (1989, p. 57).

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What is characteristic of the many regional epics is also writ large in the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, the flagships of Indian civilisation. Both are compilations of what had at one time been many independent story traditions which throughout history performers and literati alike have reworked in innumerable versions. Ramanujan identifies these *Many Ramayanas* as a "pool of signifiers" (1991, p.46), while Narayana Rao characterises the *Ramayana* as "... not just a story, but a language with which a host of (ideological) statements may be made." (Narayana Rao, 1991, p.114). Blackburn sees it as a oral tradition containing many forms: "...the diversity of the tradition—the *many Ramayanas*—is a function of the many genres, the many languages, and the many occasions on which the Rama story is orally performed."

The exact phrase, *mental text*, however, is linked to Lauri Honko's publication of the three volume *Siri Epic* and his use of this concept is somewhat different in important respects from those mentioned above, and it is especially on these differences I devote the rest of my comments.

Honko links the idea of a mental text to several lines of research and practice in the history of folkloristic text collection. One is in the early practice of folklorists to publish separately collected items as a unified text, giving the impression that it was so in the tradition

of, or even in the minds of, the singers. The famous example is of this was the Finnish national epic, the [New] *Kalavala*, as published by Elias Lönnrot in 1849. A second line of research Honko identifies as the *literary model of texts*, linked to the Finnish historical geographic school, which had as its ultimate goal the reconstruction of an original text, a *first telling*. The vast archives this approach would require make its goals unachievable. A third approach emphasises the epic performance and the general relationship of a raconteur to his tradition on one hand and his audience on the other. For this a greatly expanded notion of *text* is needed: words accompanied by a host of other features of communication must necessarily be conveyed. Honko himself recognises that only a combination of audio-video documentation to accompany transcribed, translated written text can approach the necessary standard. And even then, what we have is only one performance at one time and context. This then leads him to such questions as "How are oral *text* preserved in the singer's mind?" and "Is performance just a way to cut a *text* into a presentable shape, adequate in one particular situation but totally inadequate in others?"

These are indeed the issues with which all who are inspired by oral poetry are confronted, myself included. While I admire Honko's solutions I find his use of the term *mental text* troubling in several respects. Foley takes exception to the word *text* in the phrase: "With all of its virtually inescapable overtones of fixity, literacy, and the technology of writing, text seems a risky label to employ in describing so central, and intangible, a concept." (Foley, 1999, p.16) I take objection to the word *mental*. The phenomenon and the concepts it purports to describe, are knowable only when they are *out there*, manifest in the real world of a publically produced performance: there is nothing mental about them. The attribution of *mental* is merely heuristic, meant to embody a hypothesized realm of investigation. But like many other heuristic devices invented by social scientists such as Durkheim's collective consciousness, or the anthropologists' culture, they beg precise definition and only inspire endless, usually pointlessly self-reflexive, debate.

Should we take seriously the *mental text* as a psychological phenomenon? Granting that the performance is produced from within the performer, are we prepared, in fact, to investigate the performer's brain, memory, mind, or heart? I suspect we are not well enough equipped either technologically or by discipline to investigate these realms. The brain is best left to the neuro-psychologist, production from memory to cognitive psychologists, and the heart to students of religion and morality. If we really were seeking to discover the mental dimensions of text production in doing this kind of work we would

compose teams of collaborators such as these, set up in situ experiments of a very different nature, and probably use the more modern concepts of the cognitive sciences. While admittedly these terms are not much better defined than the ones we folklorists use, at least we would be talking the same language as our other colleagues working on similar mental phenomena.

Instead, the methodology which inform the concept of a *mental text* are in the line of text analysis carried on through over a century in folkloristics and in a rather obscure, specialised area of literary studies.

And it is from these two lines, as outlined above, that the concept of *mental text* is derived as a heuristic device to explain matters of individual production which amaze and fascinate the western investigator. In my experience, the singer and his audience are certainly not amazed or fascinated with these aspects of a performance, but they do recognise virtuosity and *truth* when they hear it. At the same time, they recognise appropriate contextual variation and individual competency, and although perhaps under most circumstances a virtuoso is the performer they seek out, someone who is far less so usually suffices. In the *paddana* tradition it what is in the heart that matters most and the *truthfulness* of the recitation. My suspicion is that as long as foreigners fail to appreciate a performer on the same grounds as the native, the two lines of interest will remain largely independent of one another.

Most of the basic concepts of text analysis employed by Honko have previously been applied by others elsewhere in the world, in India, and even within the *Tulu paddana* corpus (Claus, 1993a). And as Foley says of the basic concept, "Few would argue with the gist of this [the concept of a mental text] description." (Foley, 1999, p.16)

Although Honko takes some pains to qualify the representativeness of Naika's recitation and delineate its relationship to other recitations in other contexts by means of such concepts as idelect, register, pool of tradition, genre, and *epic archaeology*, the scope of this recitation's interparticipation with the tradition to which it belongs is not as fully addressed as it could have been. From the first page of the book we are told, "The personal owner of the epic is Mr Gopala Naika, an agriculturalist in Machar village near the town of Ujire in the Belthangady district, and a renowned singer of oral epics." The instantiated *epic* linked to the concept of the *mental text* is something of a distortion of the tradition in favor of the individual singer and the collected *text qua text*. However valuable it may be to have even such a richly documented and analysed single instance of what is an epic performance tradition, the scholar should not be satisfied until a

representative range of instances have been similarly collected and compared. The real utility of text analysis within performance study is not in delving into the mind of an individual artist (and it is questionable whether the concept of the mental text even does this), but rather to indicate the dynamic quality of its performance dimensions as it is produced by many participating performers in varying contexts.

Foley suggests a similar need to recognise that traditional genres *leak*: "... that is, there is more interplay among and interpenetration between different genres than our analytical practices customarily assume.... Only the peculiar and parochial text-centrism of western scholarship, epitomised in the one-dimensional Homeric model for comparative epic investigation, has kept us from making these connections and hearing their resonance." (NFF, 1999, pp.17-8).

What Foley is left unaware of is that initial strides have already been taken in this regard to the *Siri paddana* tradition (Claus 1993b) because Honko so utterly focuses his investigations on an individual singer, and one *text*. An more complete understanding requires that more than even a single story from within the genre (*paddana* in this case) be similarly studied in its range of distribution across the landscape and the different categories of singers who maintain them (see, for example, the research project described in Claus, 1988 and reported in Claus 1991 and 1993a). This kind of research allows us to situate any given epic recitation within local, regional, Indian and worldwide epic traditions in the sense outlined in the first two paragraphs of this note..

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