POPULAR TRADITIONS, STRATEGIC ASSETS

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The Challenge

Popular oral traditions happen to be hijacked by people other than their natural heirs. Their innate intentionality is diverted towards semantically different destinations. The purpose of hijacking is to turn them into strategic tools in pursuance of aims alien to their original intentions, in periods of time, in places and contexts different from those of their initial emergence. Peoples’ memories, rituals and artefacts happen to be appropriated by anyone — local collectives, down-trodden communities, academic institutions, cultural agencies, political parties, commercial companies, museums, government agencies, etc — for a number of opposite purposes: as ethnic decorum, as emblem of social distinction, as cultural commodity, as aesthetic object, as means of control, as ground to claims of rights, as reasons of rebellion, as living zoo to be preserved, as remnant of primitivity, as material for academic graduation, as piece of museum, etc.

Communities, for instance, in a situation of crisis go back to their ancestral heritage and draw upon it as ground of internal cohesion and assertive identity, asset of survival and progress, argument of self-respect and dignity. Non-governmental organisations utilise these traditions to disseminate modern messages and induce people to implement their projects. Private and State tourism industries turn them into marketable cultural goods. As a result, at the outset, as scholars of people’s traditions and students of human science, we are confronted with serious epistemological challenges staged by a variety of power and business interests, which overshadow our quest of human knowledge. As a matter of fact, our own motivations and legitimacy as anthropologist are themselves questioned.

A few examples will illustrate the epistemological challenge. At the level of daily cultural practices and styles of life in our epoch, supposed to be a ‘post-modernist’ era, a first form of hijacking is rampant in some social sections all over the world. Today in India, for instance, the post-modernist wave repudiates the Enlightenment and ridicules concepts of secularisation, rationality, and progress (Sarkar 1997: 103-4). The post-modernists belong to a vast middle class, whose most developed members yearn to elevate themselves to a status where they will be
sucked into globalising processes that promise material consumerist dividends at the price of dependency. A binary combination of ‘material’ advancement and ‘spiritual’ autonomy through surrogate forms of cultural or religious nationalism is not at all uncommon for such groups. Hindutva, with its notable appeal in recent years among metropolitan elites and non-resident Indians, embodies this combination at its most aggressive. (Sarkar 1997: 107)

Superficial forms of retrograde indigenism nourish the nostalgia of the modern, yet uprooted and frustrated intelligentsia:

A vague nostalgia that identifies the authentic with the indigenous... locates both in the pasts of an ever-receding community, or a present that can consist of fragments alone. Through an enshrinement of sentimentality, a subcontinent with its manifold, concrete contradictions and problems becomes a kind of dream of childhood, of a grhalakṣmī presiding over a home happy and beautiful, by some alchemy, in the midst of all its patriarchy. (Sarkar 1997: 108)

At the level of scholarly studies in cultural anthropology, a crucial issue often addressed in this regard is the dialectic of ‘modernity’ and ‘tradition’, or rather of ‘past memories’ and ‘actual experience’. This dialectic is observed in processes of cultural innovation and interpretation (Dharampal-Frick 2001), in political strategies based on ethnic mythical resources (Tiwari 1998, 2000), in quest of collective identity through constructing traditions (Srinivas 2001), in negotiation of modern historical issues with traditional resources (Sarkar 2001, Poitevin 2001e), in discriminative differentiation through restructuring inherited resources (Richman 1992), in processes of creative recontextualisation of traditions to be legitimised by the authority of old canonical texts (Christof 2001: 66-9, 74), in mass education programmes through drawing upon traditional representations and forms of performance (Bruin 1993, 1998, 1999), in fabrication of sacred biographies for the founders of religious institutions in a competitive environment (Malinar 2001), etc.

In this regard, one points to the ambiguity and apparent contradiction of discourses praising continuity in order to legitimise and realise change in the name of transformation emerging from the very heart of traditions (Beltz 2000, Fuchs 2001). Sure, “the binary opposition between tradition and modernity” carries the implicit, sterile “assumption of a stagnant past and a dynamic present. It is as if tradition represents continuity and modernity expresses the power of transformation. The problems of such
simple oppositions have long been recognised”. But it is, on the other hand, obvious that:

Inverting the opposition and discovering forces of transformation within tradition has its problems. While this does historicise tradition, it tends to overemphasise change and underestimate the significance of continuities. What status can the concepts of social and cultural transformation have when such changes are produced without any solution of continuity with and in the name of tradition? (Champakalakshmi & Gopal 1996: 122).

In this respect, our attention is drawn towards the hundreds of narrations of the story of Ram in India (Richman 2001), in South-East Asia (Bizot 1989), and elsewhere in South Asia (Chambard 1992), as well as the variety of stories of Draupadi (Hiltebeitel 1999) and versions of the Mahābhārata (Singh 1993).

It is true that particular tellings have attained various degrees of dominance and/or popularity (Vālmiki, Tulsī, the televised Rāmāyaṇa). Nonetheless, there have always been contesting voices. Where Hindu Rāmāyaṇas have predominated, Jain and Buddhist Rāmāyaṇa poets have criticised or questioned those texts by producing their own tellings. Where male dominance has been prescribed by textual traditions, women’s Rāmāyaṇa songs have expressed alternative perspectives that are more in keeping with women’s own concerns. Our essays suggest that the Rāmāyaṇa tradition permits endless refashioning of the story, sometimes in actual opposition to the way in which the story has previously been told (Richman 1992: 7-9).

Our studies of the character of Sītā in the women’s tradition of grindmill songs¹ in Maharashtra (Poitevin & Rairkar 1993: 59-75) and of popular myths circulating among lower social sections (Poitevin 2001b), while pointing to similar processes, attempt to answer related epistemological questions, namely, those of the changing logical and semantic discursive status of popular traditions at various points in time and in different contexts (Poitevin & Rairkar 1996, Poitevin 1997), especially when they are reappropriated by communities to reconstruct their identity with an heritage of traditional resources but with a difference (CCRSS I, Rairkar 1993).

To substantiate the problematic nature of the epistemological questions which this raises, I shall just point to the key figure of Sītā in the grindmill songs tradition in India (Poitevin 2001a: 45-103, 2001c). The determinant fact is that peasant women singers sitting at their millstone have only one purpose when they sing, namely, to articulate the vision that they entertain
of their harsh destiny as women. As a consequence, when they recall the basic features of Sītā’s story, it is not with the aim of featuring another personage of Sītā of their liking and placing it on record as their particular Sītā among other canonical biographies of Sītā. They select in the Rāmāyaṇa that they have heard only those few particular episodes of Sītā’s story that can symbolically reflect their own situation as women victims of a patriarchal ethos. The mythical figure operates as support of a process of cognition and recognition of their own identity as women.

Four general remarks regarding the context and motives of this re-editing are significant with regard to our argument:

First, the singers are not concerned with Sītā but with themselves. They own the myth to make it serve a function of self-cognition. Women singers radically transform the epic narrative to the extent that their re-editing is altogether inconsistent with the epic figure. The discrepancies that differentiate the Sītā of the peasant women from the Sītā of Ram in Vālmiki’s Rāmāyaṇa (Poitevin & Rairkar 1996: 174-80) are analogous to the variations revealed by studies made in other parts of India of popular traditions in which similarly, orality proves to be a privileged stake of spontaneity and autonomy of local cultures vis-a-vis written dominant orthodoxies (Citrag 1964: 1042-45, Iyengar 1983, Champakalakshmi 1996: 55-88; 111-34; 135-63).

Second, the tradition of the songs is not concerned with the life-story of Sītā as a continuous scenario displaying the full biography of an individual in pursuit of her identity, or featuring progressively a coherent historical personage. The singers select scattered episodes as per their particular needs of self-expression. Moreover, these episodes cannot easily be added to one another as to compose a continuous story, as they are simply not consistent with one another within the grindmill song tradition itself. Each of them ought consequently to be understood as a significantly distinct experience, a self-contained, irreducible and non-relativiseable imaginary construct. Concerned with themselves only, the singers naturally spot out those components only of Sītā’s life that match their urge to evoke, at a particular moment, a distinct feeling. And these feelings vary according to the variety of aspects that their existence as womanfolk may entail.

The women’s tradition of grindmill songs can be significantly differentiated in this respect from the literary tradition of Dalit Autobiographies in Maharashtra since 1975 (CCRSS 2, Poitevin 2001a: 137-230). Here, individuals assert themselves as singular human entities against internalised models and socio-cultural norms through constructing anew their life story as a narrative, with the support of a written text. Writing capacity appears congenial to an exercise of de-construction and re-
construction of one’s individuality as historical subject in the course of time. It is altogether a re-writing of history. Only an individual or a collective keen to shape and display an autonomous and coherent self-identity builds up a biography, retrospectively. Women singers at their millstone are no such individuals. They are not concerned with their ‘biography’ but the urge to articulate feelings, which vary with each day dawning upon them and the immediate ups and downs of their destiny.

Third, the genre of that oral poetry is specific: short two-line distichs with scansion, rhyme and rhythmic measure but no strict metrics. That semi-improvised and flexible lyric form proves appropriate to project instant testimonies and flashes of insights. Its frequent lack of syntax points to a kind of grammatical inconsistency, which reflects and serves processes of spontaneous expressivity.

Fourth, it is most paradoxical that women at their millstone appropriate a hegemonic form of symbolic communication to express themselves spontaneously. They avail of the resources of orality at their disposal, in particular lyrical resources offered by a flexible *sūl* form, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the towering figure of Sītā provided by a canonical epic to project the vision that they entertain of their life. This paradox is particularly characteristic of cognitive processes in oral régimes of expression and communication. Illiterate peasant women reflexively appropriate the most normative and repressive traditional figure of Sītā to construct an autonomous speech about their own experience as woman. They actually achieve this through cognitively processing the figure of Sītā’s exile (*vanavās*) as to re-edit this *vanavās* with all the basic elements of their experience of harassment at their in-laws’ (*sāsurcās*). A process of identity construction takes place through identification with a given figure, which is freely appropriated to that effect: in the terms of C.S. Peirce, a symbolic representation refers as a sign to an interepretive community (Habermas 1992: 90, 95-7).

These examples suggest three preliminary remarks that need to be kept in mind once we concern ourselves as cultural anthropologists with popular traditions.

First, the processes of ‘hijacking’ are not new or characteristic of our modern or post-modern times. Attempts by individuals and collectives at reappropriating past heritage as vehicle to express one’s own experience, and serve one’s needs of cognition and communication, are common to any moment of reflexive reassessment in the past itself. They may appear significantly intense in periods of civilisational changes, social decompartmentalisation, cultural implosion, external encroachment and the like. But, historical disturbance or not, a living tradition is precisely
the one which tries without inhibition and external prescription to figure out and articulate its actual experience with the cognitive material inherited from the past, though in total fidelity to one’s own present experience, needs and impulses. Processes of ‘negotiation’, ‘adjustment’, ‘métissage’, ‘appropriation’, ‘interpretation’, ‘recasting’, ‘contextualisation’, etc. stand as privileged modes of cultural innovation, whatever be the drives or compulsions of any sort that push towards a constant interactive or transitive circulation of idioms.

Second, the circulation of idioms is an event of language, which processes the heritage of resources without breach of continuity. The past is owned and reappropriated as a sign, which stands as a form of symbolic communication. A symbolic logic opens up the way towards innovation with continuity but without contradiction or paradox whatsoever. The process is enacted by chains of interpretants (as Peirce defines them), following particular strategies of interpretation. A semiotic insight of consciousness provides an “explanation for how ideas can be determined by previous ideas — i.e., how one idea can be transformed into another according to a rule”.

If cognitions are signs, then replicas can be generated from past cognitions and linked up with previous and future ones; “thus the intellectual character of beliefs at least is dependent upon the capability of the endless translations of sign into sign” (Habermas 1992:94).

Third, these interpretive processes raise epistemological and methodological questions, which define our challenge as the cognitive strategies of such processes call for a critical scrutiny. On what basis can individuals and communities found a successful and legitimate reappropriation of ancient narratives and popular traditions in a different historical context and likely for different aims? To what extent can local communities in a deeply modified socio-cultural environment claim for their oral, cultural patrimony the capacity of strengthening present identities at the level of material development as well as social transformation? What can the conditions of validity be for such hermeneutics? What should be the rules for achieving an ethnically sane reappropriation? How can the pitfalls of communalist obscurantism, political manipulation, confused empathy, anachronic reading, archaic identification, commercial exploitation, fanatic nationalism, segregated identity, etc. be avoided? The question can by no means ever be: How to preserve the past, pure and authentic; but what does a given society do with its heritage, how does it go about dealing with its past.

I do not intend here to address this vast series of epistemological questions. I am convinced that in such challenging circumstances, prior to
answering such difficult queries, it is important to first start by locating, circumscribing, ascertaining and recognising the singularity of our substantive domain of investigation. I want to specify elementary theoretical and practical perspectives appropriate to apprehend the nature of our objects of study. I restrict my present submission to such threshold remarks only. I shall identify the constituency of our concern in terms of four axioms, which, in my view, point to incontrovertible characteristics of popular oral traditions. Three relate to the global cognitive setting and social context in which people’s oral traditions are embedded, while the fourth one seeks to position them as forms and modes of a specific régime of expression and communication, which I categorise as ‘orature’.

Social and Cognitive Setting

Orality and democracy: a political arena

Axiom 1: Democracy stems from ‘orality’, dominion spreads through ‘literality’.

Democracy is essentially an affair of speech, addressed to and exchanged by fellow people. Democracy is a matter of faith in the spoken word, of public debate and public opinion enlivened and enlightened by a play of questions endlessly linked up. Democracy means constant and collective assessment of viewpoints through communicational practices. This is how democracy got its start and functioned in Ancient Greece, in the public square, on the strength of speech made in public. Athenian democracy rested upon speaking — ‘orality’ — and hearing — ‘aurality’. Written texts that summarised decisions taken were not “words of law” invested with an absolute authority because they were written down, but simply memory aids to help concerned people retain the decisions reached together. These decisions bound the citizens together on the strength of common accord, live involvement and consent reached *viva voce*.

In our Western societies, the written word has become predominant. Evolution towards an increasingly ‘modern’ society has gone hand in hand with the technical development of the written word. This was accompanied by a reinforcement of the power of the dominating elite classes. These elites, using writing, imposed their social and cultural control through ‘Scriptures’ (at a religious level), Constitutions (at a political level), Judicial Codes (civil society), and Legislative Texts (national identity), all vested with a universal and compelling value. The written word is synonymous with homogenisation of norms imposed on all through the control of classes of *literati*.

One must look at the dimensions of the impact that the written word can have on, as well as the changes that it can enforce upon, the domains of religion, economy, politics, and law, in order to understand the
importance that social action groups, in India as well as in other parts of the world, give to popular traditions of socially suppressed categories of the population and to the “speech act” of their representatives.

According to Michel de Certeau (1988:170,185), the difference became apparent in the 16th century when the culture born from Gutenberg’s invention created a distinction and discrimination between the written and the oral word. By declaring the popular culture as ‘oral’, the elite class defined itself through the written word. This same class began to consider ‘civilisation’ only within the boundaries of what the ‘written’ word could achieve, namely, within the language boundaries identified by the good usage of its authors and its writers, by science and its procedures. The elite class became convinced that “writing would remake the society”.

This explains the importance granted to literacy and the disdain held against those with no knowledge of the alphabet. In common parlance, those who ignore the alphabet are considered illiterate as if they were deprived of the ‘letters’ of the language. At the same time, we would classify their oral performances as pieces of ‘oral literature’ whenever we deem them fit to compare with established literary canons.

In the 18th century and at the time of the French Revolution, the written word was the self-declared indicator of power used by the (so-called) ‘enlightened’ bourgeoisie, a tool “to make history” in the hands of one particular social category. The century of the Enlightenment marks the reign of normative standardisation through writing.

The British anthropologist Jack Goody (1968, 1997a, b) dedicated his research to the study of what makes the specificity of the logic of writing, and its primary effects on social organisation and development in human communities, and civilisational transformations.

On a religious level, the written word gives those religions which are transmitted through written documents (Scriptures) a universal and ethical character. This differs from other religions that remain rather local, national and ethnic. The latter are considered for the same reasons ‘primitive’, ‘pagan’, (originally ‘rustic’, that is to say from the ‘peasant’ in the countryside as opposed to the culture of the ‘urban’ in towns), ‘backward’, ‘superstitious’ (Bhatti 2000: 9), and called to accomplish themselves in religions of the Scriptures (Wanegffelen 1997). Written religions are therefore generally proselyte and not religions into which one is born. The written word privileges dogmas. It also establishes restricted references of belonging and orthodoxy much like when borders are drawn for demarcation and inimical nationalist divides. The written word demands conversion and produces the faithful and the dissident. Through the written word, truth
takes on a different meaning because the official Scriptures become the reference and no longer the experience of individuals or human beings.

On a judicial level, laws replace customs and justice is associated with a written code of law. Documented evidence (in writing) acquires greater value than oral testimony. The written word certifies and legitimises. It guarantees propriety. It permits the substitution of texts in place of reality. Since then, all petitions and requests must be furnished in writing and civil servants’ promises, unless laid down in black and white, are denied. The simple word of a poor man vanishes in the wind while the authorities become unaccountable for their words.

In short, the essential breakthrough of the written form is firstly a process of universalisation and generalisation of laws, rules, and norms. Second, it is the confiscation of authority and power by the ‘literate’, that is to say, ‘educated’ elite with corresponding mechanisms of formalisation of human relations. In other words, this means the marginalisation of the individual who can rely only on the strength of his spoken word: the one who is the accountable author of his speech finds himself in some way or another rid of, dispossessed, robbed of his words.

Still, oral language remains local and spontaneous. Everyone has equal access to it. Everyone is free to seize and utilise the language in his own way to speak out his mind and express himself. If the written word is an argument of strength of the powerful, then the spoken word is an asset of counter-power for the weak and the humble.

**Oral tradition and innovation: an arena of cultural dynamics**

**Axiom 2: Spoken memory is a faculty of creative repetition**

It is significant that the cognitive patterns of a spoken memory are embedded in the language of one community or one generation, and operate always in the ‘here and now’. For these communities and their tradition, it is not the past as such which merits to be recollected. Spoken memory does not bother with recording reminiscences nor does it archive documents. It is not concerned with finding arguments for ‘writing’ the ‘social history’ of yesteryear. The community members recollect past traditions through a process of knowledge that functions in the present only and proceeds by reinterpretating things remembered in order to better think of what is to come and to aim for the future.

The two essential aspects of spoken traditions are repetition and variation. It would be futile to try to reconstitute the true primeval form in order to posit it as the authentic and, therefore, normative or definite form, and search for its single original author.
Two constitutive features can be stressed in this respect:

First, people’s traditions usually do not carry any particular signature to identify their author and authenticate their wording as do written texts which are read to be recited by heart and quoted verbatim with the name of their author as is the case with written established traditions. (Poitevin & Rairkar 1996: 258). People’s traditions are speech acts within a community, which receives them as its own words once the members of that community have apprehended them to their needs of the moment, and if required, possibly modified according to these needs.

Second, it is thus congenital to popular oral traditions to present themselves as a multiplicity of variants. Their repetition implies their reinvention. Popular oral traditions exist only as various versions more or less divergent from one another. Spoken memory is not at all a word-forward recitation by heart. Tales or epics are only retained in such a manner by societies where education relies on the alphabet, reading and writing. By subordinating speech to the eye and the truth to the sight, written text extinguishes the man’s voice (Detienne 1981: 81-2). The voice and the song, on the contrary, offer space to spontaneity (Caelen & Bel 2001).

The necessity for popular traditions to be always retold and repeated specifies the authority, the authenticity, and the status of orality as a mode of transmission. Only the agreement of a community, like the connivance of a group of listeners whose memory has been reactivated, ensures the existence of a people’s tradition from one interpreter to another while, at the same time, it authorises and authenticates it (Jakobson 1973: 59-72). A community carries it, and only this community can change or modify it. This collective control allows for oral tradition being compared to language that exists also only through collective consensus (Detienne 1981: 83-5).

These characteristics build up living memory into an act of cognition. Popular traditions become knowledge, and the act of their transmission becomes an arena of cultural dynamics. In a culture under a régime of oral communication, words, narratives, melodies, proverbs, epic stories, etc. are incessantly undergoing a creative variation, thanks to their very repetition while their truth value is decided by the consent of the community itself immediately at the time of performance. Within and through these repetitive performances, the community apprehends the identity that it constructs and authorises for itself at that moment till the next hearing or partaking of another performance becomes another act of reappropriation and reinvention. The community or the collective constantly renews itself without a solution of continuity in every act of spoken memory. The understanding of the past is the fruit of an intersubjective practice, which
enhances the individual’s subjectivity and expands it to the dimensions of the community.

**Endogenous knowledge and social configuration: an anthropological arena**

**Axiom 3: Exogenous development processes are unwanted and not viable.**

Popular oral traditions carry endogenous systems of knowledge. During the process of transmission, they organise and interpret the given data with reference to their own cognitive patterns, whatever the nature of that knowledge, be it a practical tradition relating, for instance, to land cultivation or birth attendance, or a cultural heritage such as the grindmill songs tradition relating to a vision of one’s destiny. In the latter example, the peasant women’s ability to create, modify, perform and transmit freely the distichs of their songs down generations, through an indefinite and unbroken sequence of symbolic signs and interpretations, testifies to an autonomous knowledge within women’s communities, which transcends the conventional boundaries of family, village, caste, religion and time.

Two drawbacks that generally characterise the status of social knowledge would prove equally detrimental to our understanding of popular traditions.

Social and human sciences, these last one hundred fifty years, have developed by constructing themselves as specialised scientific disciplines, each with a body of categories specifically constitutive of a unique, independent and autonomous domain. These categories lead to the definition of operative concepts and to the elaboration of methodological procedures appropriate to defined fields of research. There is no point in denying the validity or the necessity of such fields of investigation, or the operationality of conceptual tools, which construct realities into objects of knowledge. It becomes, nevertheless, obvious that too much specialisation and disciplinary independence conceals the significant nexus that links the different levels — social, political, ritual, economic, symbolic, etc. — and the different dimensions — anthropological, ideological, psychological, physical, sociological, aesthetic, biological, etc. — of the realities studied.

By constructing such fields of knowledge, that are isolated by systems of self-sufficient disciplinary tools, a second damage is committed, namely, the segregation or even the alienation of the scholar from his research, and from the knowledge that he produces. The subjectivity of the human agents become objects that the scholar keeps at a distance or even excludes from his research in order not to ‘contaminate’ it. The opinions of human actors, the indigenous knowledges, ancestral practices, spontaneous feelings and representations, in short, the symbolic systems transmitted through autonomous traditions tend to be pushed aside, considered as subjective singularities foreign to the rationality of a universal knowledge
that has nothing to do with or nothing to receive from the common sense of individuals. The trained viewpoint of a specialist cannot but be different from the short-sightedness of the naive consciousness and close-knit traditions of those who lack general expertise. Science builds itself in opposition to such traditions.

These two drawbacks are especially harmful when we are concerned with social and cultural processes where the role of people's traditions is consequential and preponderant. Such is particularly the case with traditions looked down upon as 'popular', that is, 'folkloristic', 'primitive', 'superstitious', etc. (Crooke 1896).

As a consequence, a relevant understanding, a legitimate reappropriation, and a fruitful re-use of popular traditions can be secured only if those who are their creators and heirs are directly involved in the work of interpretation, analysis and utilisation. As a rule, the live consciousness of a human subject cannot be adequately apprehended by the sole insight of a foreign onlooker. The human agent's subjectivity is required as an integral part in the analytical process to which we wish to submit people's traditions. It should be identified and recognised as no less valid and no more dubious than the external investigators' subjectivity. In forgetting this principle, we risk jeopardising these popular traditions, allowing them to become objects of folkloristic knowledge available for the purposes of alien strategies. The folkloric 'Other' is a part of the 'We' and of a universal knowledge about man (Wallerstein 1997: 57).

**Orature : A Distinct Linguistic Arena**

**Axiom 4: 'Orature' is not 'literature'**

Popular traditions belong to a régime of cognition, expression and communication that I call 'orature'. I shall first justify and define the concept, and then elaborate on its three analytical components.

*A concept of ‘orature’ as system of intertwined rhetorics.* Any oral production is bound to a determined space and time. It is a fugitive act of speech. Still, once spoken out, a word may remain stored in the memory of all. Orality constructs a memory when writing, while trying to assist recollection, may smother memory and asphyxiate its vigour (Agamben 1998:45; Segalen 1956:6-7, 160). We have already been told by Plato that writing is not only powerless against forgetfulness but is its very cause, far from proving its remedy. To the god Theuth who brings him the letters that he has just invented as a “medicine for the memory”, Thamus, the king of Egypt, refuses to be convinced that he should provide his subjects with them. He justifies as follows his denial:
You have said exactly the contrary of what they actually achieve. They will provoke oblivion in those who will learn them, because they will not take care of their memory any more, and relying on writing, they will remember things through external and alien signs, and not from within. It is therefore not for memory but for remembrance that you have found a medicine. (Plato, Phedre 275a)

Memory resorts, in particular, to three cognitive capacities or three modes of construction, articulation and expression of knowledge: poetry, intonation and melody. These three mental faculties are bound to become the privileged subject matter of analytical investigation and methodological experimentation in our study of popular oral traditions, especially speech-song traditions, whatever be the respective importance of the prosodic mechanisms and ways specific to each mode. The immense and immemorial tradition of grindmill songs in India proves to be, in this respect, a particularly relevant domain for comprehensive research. I shall take it here as reference and ground to illustrate my argument as this tradition relies profusely on a wealth of ways of expression and symbolic communication, much more than many other kinds of people’s traditions.

As oral transmission of meanings, these songs transcend the limits of the verbalised and the verbalisable through incorporating three main communication strategies: as speech acts or linguistic practices, they use the words and forms of a lexicon and linguistic system; as intonation or speech inflections, they use the lyric resources of poetry and the prosodic tools of a particular intonation system; as tunes, they avail of the expressive potentialities of melodic patterns available to them. On the one hand, they belong to the domain of speech prosody, both “lexical” (word stress, tone and quantity) and suprasegmental or “non-lexical” (intonation proper) (Hirst & Di Cristo 1998). Once we know that the prosodic features of a language are the first ones acquired at an early age, and that the women sitting and singing on their mill at dawn since their youngest age could avail of no formal musical learning, it is legitimate to expect that the same sophisticated expressive tools and strategies of speech prosody will play a significant role in their half-improvised singing as substitutes to patterns which they have not learnt in a formal musical training (Bel 2000). On the other hand, and this is a feature of particular importance in the case of grindmill songs, the tunes reappropriate these linguistic means at another level of melodic expression without modelling their variations on strict tonal patterns. They do this in a more flexible manner than do many other forms of popular traditions, especially the classical tonal traditions.
The language of the grindmill songs may severely suffer from its rustic and even almost non-existent syntax. This prevents the refined articulation of logical and affective subtleties. But this deficiency is altogether immaterial — and possibly a blessing in disguise — as their rhetoric infirmity is more than compensated by the symbolic potency of the gesture of the body, the tone and intonation of the voice, the rhythm of the utterance, the rhyme of the verses, the tune of the song and the melism on particular words. The written sign is miserably deprived of all this. ‘Orature’ is coined to refer to this sophisticated, composite texture of intertwined systems of expression and symbolic communication, which vividly deny the supremacy of ‘literature’. Linguistically speaking, our attention and study would therefore focus on the potentialities of these five intermingling rhetorics if we want to apprehend the power of orature as the régime of expression and symbolic communication specific to people’s oral traditions.

This power is impressive for instance in the indefinitely diverse personal styles of expressivity of women performers — but the same ought equally to be said with regard to storytellers, epic bards, lyric singers, etc. This diversity is the outcome of constant trade-offs between ‘language’, ‘poetry’ and ‘music’, manifestations of various prosodic systems which, in the subjective dimensions of speech communication, transcend the normative frameworks of lexical constraints, morphological rules, syntactic norms, intonation patterns and musical structures (Caelen & Bel 2001). The urgent need felt by women to express and communicate between themselves — the performers perform for no audience whatsoever, indirectly or by implication — justifies the relative freedom taken by the speaker-singers to disrupt these various linguistic frameworks. Thus, phonemes are far from realising their canonical forms and sometimes hard to catch, various disfluencies break the “right” (i.e. textual or academic) linguistic conventions, and speech prosody often disrupts the syntactic organisation (Caelen-Haumont 1978, 1981). In spite of this, spontaneous speakers understand each other well and often more significantly than they would through linguistically correct speech practices.

A striking feature in the performance of grindmill songs is, for instance, a wide discrepancy between the conventional textual material as recited by performers to be written down on cards for archiving purposes, and its rendering in the actual singing. Characteristic figures of spontaneous speech are introduced in this process, notably: a fragmentation of syntactic units, the chunking of words, repetitions, phatic markers and “asynthetic” or “dissynthetic” ruptures. Emphasis on the most significant words is best achieved by placing them on a complex melodic pattern so that they are performed in a melism (Caelen & Bel 2001). Thus, in the absence of a system of codification for tunes and lyrics — the orl itself is not a strictly
codified form — performers feel free to explore melodic (tonal and temporal) structures emphasising the meaning of words, or conveying additional meanings that the core lyrics did not articulate. Since the linguistic structures and the musical models may be activated independently, the women singers’ effective realisation of speech-song can freely “appropriate” language forms at the acoustic, phonetic, prosodic, semantic, syntactic and emotional levels.

(1) The context, first analytical field

For analytical purposes three different dimensions can be conceptually differentiated as structurally constitutive of that distinct régime of cognition, expression and symbolic communication that I call ‘orature’. The study of their consistency or correspondence becomes the specific object of a linguistic theory of ‘orature’.

The first level is that of the context in which an oral performance stands as a particular act of expression and mode of communication. “The key to deciphering the musical and textual content may reside in the performance itself with all its extralinguistic and extramusical features” (Bel 2000). Let us mention the most conspicuous and determinant contextual factors.

To start with, the whole task of grinding at dawn as physical agency and work ritual, is the essential spatial environment in which the tradition is embedded: the motions of the entire body and its repeated gestures, the breathing scansion, the modulations of the singers’ voice among the other voices in the room (of children and other family members, of cattle and morning activities in the stable such as feeding the cattle or milking the cows, of the cock-crow which signals the start of the whole day chores, etc.), the noise of the arm rings which rhythmically articulates the whole work-and-body moves, etc.

The location parameters of the grinding work within the whole spatial setting of the house architecture cannot be overlooked either. The singing performance cannot be properly understood once detached from the anthropological attributes of its location in the spatial dispensation of the house (Poitevin & Rairkar 1993: 187-92). The temporal particularities do also very significantly bear upon the will and capacity of expression and communication of the performers (Poitevin & Rairkar 1996: 11).

The grinding is, moreover, to be understood as women themselves conceive of it in their own tradition of songs, in which they give it a singular semiotic value. They dedicate themselves to the task with a conscious insight of the social and cultural connotations semantically
attached to this particular work as symbolic synecdoche of their whole women’s existence.

There is, above all, an organic link between the grinding work at dawn and the speech, which is sung, the semantics of this speech itself being organically connected with the representations that the womanfolk entertain about their everyday condition. A Marathi saying says “till you grasp the hand of the millstone in your palms, and grind, no verse comes to your mind”. While collecting songs from elderly women, who were trying to recollect them on our request, some women confided their difficulty in recalling them though they had sung them for years and years in their youth: they felt like sitting again at the mill and pulling the stone for the songs to come back spontaneously to mind while grinding — “then only shall we be able to remind them”. Similarly, at the time of audio-recording performances,

When women stop singing and re-tell the text to facilitate its faithful transcription, it is clear from their recitation style that they own an autonomous knowledge of text, although they feel reluctant to detach it from the song performance. They are aware of reciting “songs”, not “verses” (Bell 2000).

The connection is also organic between the speech-song and the presence (though sometimes virtual or implicit) of a woman companion with whom one sings in unison. This is reflected in the imperative and socially commanded compulsion to sing. No one should ever grind in silence. Everyone should “talk to the grindmill”, that is, express oneself while grinding. Some songs even scold the young, shy or introvert daughter-in-law who pulls a sour face and is reluctant to sing. Elder women even put pressure on her and frighten her with such warnings as “Nobody, even your very brother, or a saint passing along and begging your hospitality, would ever eat of your bread if its flour has been ground in silence”. The interpersonal link is essential to the speech-song: one is compelled to “speak to the mill” to establish this binding. The act of speech-song is a sign, that is to say, a ‘sym-bol’, a mode of recognition and junction of distinct but matching beings.

The pragmatic aspect is essential to a linguistic régime of orature. The speech-song as a sign is a symbolic representation “intended to inculcate” his statement “into an interpretant”, says Peirce (CE1: 477, quoted by Habermas 1992: 95). “The sentence-sign does not refer only to something in the world but refers at the same time to an interpretive community” (ibid). The tradition of the “verses on the mill” would simply cease to exist — and it actually ceases to exist with its specific identity — as soon as this intentionality is lost. The song on the mill is never a parte. It is always a
face-to-face speech. Grindmill songs, specific to the female gender, stand as a touchstone for understanding, beyond and through the psychological motivations, if not obsessive impulse, which prompt their performers to sing, the women’s urge to establish among themselves a binding togetherness.

Such is also the function of tales or mythical narratives, which do not exist without an audience. Short of an addressee, reduced to the state of pure text which is narrated, recorded on tape, archived on shelves, grindmill songs — and for that matter any popular tradition — become simple mental objects that may loiter in anybody’s mind, tunes which can be mumbled by anybody, anytime, anywhere, or picked up by any kind of vested interest — an abandoned property that has deserted its owner and belongs nowhere. They cease to be linguistic signs of symbolic communication binding subjects to one another. They are no more language, act of speech. Unless they continue to be so for those who collect them and make use of them in a totally different manner, time and context. It is precisely this that becomes our further serious concern as this re-appropriation raises a number of epistemological questions, such as those that I raised at the start.

A semiotic event in a system of orature has always a ‘respondant’, even though virtual. Even a peasant woman singing alone on her millstone inherits a tradition of which she is the heir: she receives a song which is addressed to her by previous generations; she appropriates her heritage with the assignment to hand it down to all her sisters of today and tomorrow. The same with a tale and a myth, till they become pure texts, dead signs, cultural fossils. They cease then to be themselves as when they were living word in a ritual, a feast, a carnival, a celebration, a collective function, a liturgy — in short — in the middle of an audience, of which the narrator is part and parcel, whatever be that audience, a family, clan, caste, ethny, region or nation.

To conclude, a first methodological principle of any semiotic study of a people’s living tradition is that one cannot keep aloof of the “multivocal discursivity” (Vecchione 1997: 102) staged by its performance. The reason is that a living popular tradition exists only as performance. The latter’s context stages the multivalent semantic horizon against which only its wide and comprehensive expressive value can be apprehended.

(2) The signature, second analytical field

The second level is that of the signature. This is the level of a claim to authority over the act of speech as utterance, and to ownership of the statement as claim to knowledge. The written tradition has the concepts
of authorship and copyright. What about the authorship of and right over a community’s oral traditions? The oral linguistic sign exists only in the flow of a collective tradition, which constantly feeds on itself, reappropriates itself, evolves, transforms itself, asserts itself and thrives differently, depending upon its various carriers, performers and performances. A tale, a myth, a grindmill song are carried by more or less gifted individuals who are appreciated and honoured for their talents, or sometimes singled out as a collective: a family, a clan, a sub-caste, a group of professionals with appropriate skills, means and status. But people’s traditions usually do not need to recognise a single or individual author with a reserved right to ownership: each and every one in the community is their author, to the extent it recognises himself/ herself in the speech of another one.

A collective tradition is all the more significant and rich for everyone when it is commonly shared and owned. The speech-song binds distinct beings and builds them into a community without asphyxiating their autonomy. In the course of the performance, the story-teller, the narrator of a myth, the dramatic actor on the stage and the woman singer on her millstone adjust, change, colour, transform, if needed, their speech and tune according to the reactions of their partner or the audience which they address. Reciprocal recognition is a creative process of a commonly shared memory of self. A living tradition is subject to constant transformation as the necessity of its constant oral repetition in the middle of audiences leads to its uninterrupted invention through the sanction that it receives from the audience at the time of performances. The community is its ultimate author and owner. The performers are those gifted with the capacity to interpret the consensus of the majority at the time of performances.

In this respect, instead of concepts of copyright and authorship, let us differentiate three kinds of agency that can be distinguished for purpose of analysis. They are structurally constitutive of a system of orature. We can conceptually identify them in anthropological terms as follows: source agency, authority agency and heritage agency.

(1) The source agency is, for instance, in the case of the grindmill songs, the irrepressible compulsion of self-expression. The song originates in a wish of self-expression and confidence sharing, a will to pour out what one carries in the heart, an urge to articulate the vision of one’s life-world (Poitevin & Rairkar 1996: 113-38)

(2) The authority agency is explicitly declared in the collective signature of authentification that is stated in the tradition of grindmill songs with the stereotyped utterance I tell you, woman! (Poitevin & Rairkar 1996: 256-
8, Rairkar 1996). The formula is characteristic of the style of enunciation of that tradition. Formula of authentification, it is also the signature of identification of the author, but an author who identifies herself as “woman”, one of the “race of women”, bāiljāt, and not an individual who would assert herself through a distinctive opposition to her community or other women of that community.

It does not stand as an utterance for one’s own sake, private benefit or solitary satisfaction. It is a human agency where speech as an act tends to establish an interpersonal relation, a binding rapport between subjects. The addressee is, therefore, called to grant an active welcome to the testimony of an addressee who speaks out towards somebody. (Poitevin & Rairkar 1996: 256)

(3) The heritage agency is, for instance, in the case of the grindmill songs, the peasant women community. Through the ‘tradition’, that is to say, the handing down through centuries of speech-songs at dawn with the recognition, sanction, agreement, appropriation and transformation by generations, they constantly build and rebuild a memory of Self of which they remain the authorised heir as a community. A collective secures a constantly renewed relevance for its ‘traditions’, making them a vital legacy.

To conclude with a second methodological principle, we shall, on the one hand, recognise the privileged authority, competence and duty of the communities that are the natural carriers and heirs of a living tradition, to carry it out further, actualise, enliven and fulfil its potentialities. But on the other hand, no community can keep its heritage as its sole preserve, with the claim, for instance, that no one else will be able to do justice to it or legitimately make sense of it. For two reasons: first, human reason is one, and second, humanity as the totalising subject of history exists nowhere else than in a process of sharing and exchange of all its resources.

(3) The semiosis, third analytical field

The third level is that of the semiosis, that is, the process of significance as production and transmission of meanings through signs. This process occurs — to refer again to our comprehensive example of the grindmill songs — through the triple merging of 1) the spoken words and phrases which are subject to lexical, syntactic and prosodic rules; 2) the ool poetic form which does not abide by rigid metric rules, but spontaneously puts words together in sets with rhythm and rhyme, and pulls them from the banal prosody of everyday language forms up to a lyric dimension; and 3) the tune, which eventually transfigures the whole linguistic material when the dynamics specific to the musical semiotics carries away the words
with their lyrics towards another semantic argumentation of a totally different order.

As poetry, the lyrics of the text are pregnant with an irreducible metaphoric dimension, that of a ‘poetic potency’ — a poiesis — which transforms the linguistic material and cannot be verbalised by the latter. The European medieval scholars were already trying to characterise the poetic discourse in terms of its final causes: delectatio (delight), firmitas memoriae (steadfastness of memory), lucida ac vetusta brevitas (lucid and lasting brevity). These distinctive features were exemplified by directives relating to euphony and the nobility of the vocabulary. (Zumthor 1975: 23). These are qualities inherent as well in the Indian tradition of grindmill songs.

For the grindmill songs, as for the Romanic poetic languages, the verse plays a crucial role in the structuring of the phrase, acting as a mould and a catalyst. Its rhythmic forms operate upon the verbal material to produce combinations of words and phrases that coincide with the most simple syntactic structure. The verse has no definite metre, but rhythms, pace, cadence, and dynamic forms, a proportionality constitutive of a phonic structure, movements phonetically tuned or assorted, the rhyme being only the last of these tunings at the end of the verse.6

Such terms as modulatio (modulation), consonantia (consonance) and connumeratio (measuring) used by the Ancients and the mediaeval theoreticians may be retained as most appropriate to qualify the form of the poetic rhythm of a number of Indian oral traditions. If we agree to identify the rhythm or modulatio, in actual practice, with the simultaneous application of particular rules of isosyllabism and homophony, consonantia may point to homophony, and connumeratio to isosyllabism (Zumthor 1975: 125, 128).

More than through the lyrics, it is mainly as melody that the speech-song liberates itself totally from the support of words, which poetry is inevitably bound to use as its matter, and transcends the tonal patterns of ordinary speech prosody. We stressed the fact that syntactic/ semantic structures are often incomplete or non-existent. They cannot therefore originate the tonal canvas: tunes offer the tonal canvas. “The conventional tonal canvas is not a syntactic/ semantic structure but the tune on which songs are sung. And it is moreover difficult to abstract tunes from the lyrics of songs” (Bel 2000).

For the purpose of study, the tune might possibly be conceived in the wake of the lyrics and tonal patterns as their semiotic extension. It makes sense, therefore, for semiotic research to envisage that strategies identified
in experimental studies of reading and spontaneous speech (such as those of the role of tonal patterns in conveying rhetoric aspects of verbal communication hitherto overlooked by classical linguistic analysis) might be worked out by singers when the focus of their performance is a subjective reinterpretation of textual and symbolic contents of the lyrics. Speech and song prosodies retain attention naturally once we are concerned with identifying linguistic tools and strategies of expression specific to popular oral traditions. This is the purpose which presently prompts scholars (Bel 1999, 2000, Caelen & Bel 2001) at the Laboratory “Language and Speech” (CNRS, University of Provence, France) to experiment with the comparative study of two remote forms of expression, namely, improvised everyday dialogues in French and the poetry sung by our Indian peasant women on their grindmill in Maharashtra. The purpose is an investigation of “spontaneity” in semi-improvised speech-dialogue and speech-song. Both the improvisatory processes are directed by predefined topics, and are subject to constraints. The focus on spontaneous speech-song production aims at outlining its main features with respect to forms, functions and actors involved. The main attempt presently is to analyse and define with the help of categories and means of speech prosody, the role played by subjectivity in processes of improvised speech-dialogue and speech-song. Hopefully, by describing the spaces, indices and contours of the rhetorics of improvisation, one may identify the rhetorics of subjectivity as displayed in spontaneous expression of affectivity.

Improvised singing is a domain instituted by the interaction of two distinct semiotic spaces, namely, intonation and melody. Intonation — both in speech and song — is a globalisation process commanding a force of cohesion, a space of invariants displaying structures of expression. The first function of prosody is intonative, namely, to describe through its melodic contours the organisation of linguistic and syntactic structures. The second function, melism — melodic/ prosodic inventive diversions — belongs to the domain of expression of subjectivity and affectivity. Intonation and melody point to excursions within a space of subjectivity and variability.

Developing new insights into the act of singing at the grindmill as an expression and communication process implies, to mention one particular instance of analytical task, elucidating the role of implicit signatures embedded in each individual performance, notably the ones approximately designated as personal styles of singing (Caelen & Bel 2001). The hypothesis is that these personal styles might be the outcome of trade-offs between “music” and “language”, namely, the normative framework of a tune against the fluctuant manifestations of prosody in the subjective dimensions of speech communication. Moreover, specific musical effects happen to
bring in discursive elements that may support, and sometimes contradict, the discursive content of the song lyrics. Melisms belong to a process of individualisation commanding a force of dissociation or differentiation. So far, most studies of prosody with respect to emotion have addressed well-categorised types of discourse (expressing joy, surprise, fear, anger etc.), with little attention given to ‘ordinary’ emotion as found in any sort of oral communication. The finding is that prosodic contours in spontaneous speech and in sung poetry display a certain amount of invariance across languages and speech domains.

Eventually, the tune emerges as an altogether autonomous semantic event. Its study requires an analysis of semantic and discursive contents difficult to trace (to some extent, overlooked) in ordinary situations of speech communication (Caelen & Bel 2001). It would undoubtedly be shortsighted to reduce the syntactic/semantic effects of performed *acts* to subforms of ordinary speech. Similarly, the fact that their musical content resists melodic and stylistic classifications does not imply that it only needs to be “straightened” to fit into a predefined musical model, notwithstanding the versatility and proclaimed universality of the model. Discursive structures may emerge from looking at “text” and “melody” as inseparable dimensions of the performance. Words might contain clues to the study of intonation and vice versa. Lyrics and melody are the two outstanding semiotic systems available and specific to orature.

Let us sum up. The verse is the place of the lyric structuration, and the distich is the unit that modulates both the verses in a single rhythmic co-incidence or con-sonance, simultaneously at both the formal and the semantic levels. Each distich as poetry is an unbreakable semiotic form, complete in itself. Then, the definitely determinant dimension of the tune appropriates and pervades it. The lyrics of the verses composed on the grindmill cannot be dissociated from the musical melody which restructures and transfigures them from within, and elevates them towards new semantic heights. The rhythmic structures, the tonal patterns and the melism, which compose a speech-song, ultimately find an absolutely new and definitive value, beyond their own semiotic and semantic components, in the singularity of the performance, that is to say, the actual singing, which is a coalescence of speech, act and tune, and whose meaning is determined by its actualisation within a given context.

What is ultimately significant is the coherence or connivance of the wording and singing once actualised by the performance as a discourse within the always unique, historical environment of the performers. Otherwise, why should the peasant women of India try to articulate again and again at dawn, what they feel urgently prompted to express, “opening their heart”, time and again, every morning at the cock-crow, through
singing rather than only through speaking out once and for all, or writing for others a piece of literature? But what intimate truth inaccessible to common words and everyday prosody do the singers succeed in expressing and communicating more profoundly through a performance incorporating lyrics and melism as the soul\(^7\) of their work of grinding at dawn before sunrise? Peasant women feel obsessively compelled to sing because the lyrics of their songs are themselves short of linguistic resources and prosodic strategies to articulate what they want to express: only melism and melodies can help them. To what extent? Tukārām, the greatest saint-poet of the lowest social strata of Maharashtra in the first half of the 17\(^{th}\) century,\(^{10}\) remains disenchanted:

Thanks to stubbornness, if one obtains a mere nothing, it is to be rejected. The fruit of a right design, one does not see the energy capable of obtaining it. The songs of the millstone, would one gauge their real extent literally? Millstones, mortars and beaters, would they get entry to the Kingdom for us — says Tukā.

Conclusion

Four remarks by way of a conclusion: First, we have all along argued with reference to the grindmill songs tradition. One reason is that we have here a comprehensive exemplar of people’s oral tradition. Here is an accomplished example of opposition between a masculine “culture of the script” and a feminine “culture of the speech”. (Poitevin & Rairkar 1996: 7-10, 25-90). The latter emerges through a break, namely, that difference that inaugurates a spontaneous (Caelen 2001), purely oral and sung poetry among a socially and culturally marginalised population. Here is a “corpus of orature” that substantially differs from any “corpus of literature” in the sense that, as a milieu of expression and symbolic communication of the womenfolk only and for itself exclusively, it is essentially faithful to and honest with its own affective impulses, much more than to any literary or ideological rule enforced by menfolk. This heritage never did look for a written support to constitute itself, and never felt the need of recognition by any established institution of any sort to remain vibrant over centuries.

Second, our methodological experiments in the field of communication practices and studies of the age-old women’s oral tradition of the grindmill songs led us to realise the semiotic comprehensiveness and topicality of that tradition, with regard to research on ‘orature’ as the specific characteristic of people’s living traditions. This remarkable case in point of an immense and pure phenomenon of people’s lyric speech-song, which is specifically distinct from other women’s oral traditions and from other comparable or related musical forms known to womenfolk and menfolk.
all over India, gives us the most appropriate material for comprehensive semiotic studies of people’s oral traditions.

Third, we referred to the grindmill songs tradition as a particularly significant illustration of essential and unavoidable methodological principles. The same principles would apply to other forms of people’s oral traditions, such as mythical narratives, ritual practices, Dalit narratives, transmission of crafts and indigenous knowledge.

Fourth, my intention with these preliminary methodological observations was only to bring to the threshold the tasks to be undertaken. The real critique of processes of appropriation and valorisation, interpretation and recontextualisation, ‘hijacking’ and misappropriation remains to be done. We are not indeed concerned with oral traditions to archive them as literary fossils on library shelves, or with specimens of material culture as pieces to be preserved in museums, neither with cultural wealth to be academically redeemed. We feel concerned with securing for people’s oral traditions the renewed lease of life that they deserve, and that we need as viatic to go ahead as humankind with the wisdom of our forefathers.

Notes

1. The lyrics of more than 50,000 grindmill songs have been collected in a database where they are classified on the basis of a content analysis of recurrent themes covering all aspects of the daily lives of their female performers (Poitevin & Rairkar 1996). Songs are distichs known as ṭɔyā in Marathl. Archived in Devanagari script, they are correlated to data about the performers and places of performance. This corpus offers a first-hand asset for in-depth studies of concepts and representations (to date, 3,282 semantic units can be distinctively identified) embedded in the highly refined, spontaneous poetic language of female performers. Since 1995, this documentation has been complemented with audio (occasionally video) recordings of entire performances with the aim of better capturing the melodic-prosodic patterns of communication of women singers. (Bel 1999, Bacci 1999).

2. This insight “follows a recent methodological trend in French linguistics, namely, instructional semantics (sémantique instructionnelle) in contrast with the classical approach of componential semantics (sémantique componentielle) (Kleiber 1994 (Bel 2000).

3. The linguistic sign is exchanged as a sym-bol in reference to the etymology of this Greek term, ymbolon, which means “an object divided between strangers, who could come to recognise each other when the pieces are fitted together” and tally.

4. We use this word with the creative connotations that the “performance theory” has attached to it in the field of “folklore studies”. Popular traditions are not only in a constant state of change, they are dynamic and fluid as people transform them while receiving and handing them down. Folk traditions are constantly re-generated in each act of transmission as the result of people’s
mental creativity. A living tradition is a matter of variation or creative reworking, realised when a tradition is reactivated at the moment of its performance. People's traditions are the result of such processes of transformation along generations, each one owning its heritage to rework it as per its needs under the pressure of changing circumstances that call for readjustment. Popular traditions should therefore be comprehensively apprehended and displayed as a creation, from the moment of their creation (manufacturing of a material object, composition of a tale, invention of a tune, etc.), to the subsequent interpretation and various meanings constructed by their heirs in the course of time.

5. The verbal form ovane corresponding to the noun *ovl* means “to thread or string, to stitch or to sew”.

6. The hypothesis usually agreed upon is that etymologically the word ‘rhyme’ comes from the Latin *rythmus*, rhythm, (Zumthor 1975: 125-43).

7. Speakers tend to rely on tonal patterns, an aspect of speech prosody — basically excursions of the fundamental pitch (fundamental frequency) “F0” — to make their message “known”, “believed”, and to instil a subjective dimension into it and convince.

8. Bel (2000): “If we were to define “melodic phrasing” (anga) in grindmill songs, we would look for a combination of melodic and prosodic parameters. Indeed, these two notions borrowed from musicology and linguistics cover the same *physical* (acoustic) reality, namely time/ pitch structures. However, the distinction makes sense at the *cognitive* (musicological/ phonological) level. The bundling of these cognitive and physical aspects in either domain (musicology or linguistics) may be achieved by the common label “intonation system”. The following broader definition of intonation holds true in music: “On the physical level, intonation is used to refer to variations of one or more acoustic parameters. Of these, fundamental frequency (F0) is universally acknowledged to be the primary parameter. Many authors, however, have drawn attention to the pluriparametric nature of intonation, which, besides fundamental frequency, involves variations of intensity and segmental duration (Rossi *et al.* 1981, Beckman 1986). Some authors in particular include under the term intonation aspects of temporal organisation or rhythm, which, besides intensity and duration, may be reflected in variations of spectral characteristics such as distinctions between full and reduced vowels (Crystal 1969; Hirst & Di Cristo, op.cit.: 2)

9. See Poitevin & Rairkar 1996, note pp.93-4


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