

Characteristics of Orality

From *Orality and Literacy* by Walter J. Ong (34-57)

“Think memorable thoughts. In a primarily oral culture, to solve effectively the problem of retaining and retrieving carefully articulated thought, you have to do your thinking in mnemonic patterns, shaped for ready oral recurrence. Your thought must come into being in heavily rhythmic, balanced patterns, in repetitions or antitheses, in alliterations and assonances, in epithetic and other formulary expressions, in standard thematic settings..., in proverbs which are constantly heard by everyone so that they come to mind readily and which themselves are patterned for retention and ready recall, or in other mnemonic forms. Serious thought is intertwined with memory systems. Mnemonic needs determine even syntax.”

In a primarily oral culture, thought and expression tend to be of the following sorts:

Additive rather than subordinate

Example: The beginning of the Bible: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was void and empty, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the spirit of God ... “ The passage has nine introductory “ands.” The same passage is translated in the *New American Bible* this way: “In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless wasteland, and darkness covered the abyss, while a mighty wind ...

Oral structures “add” thoughts together (coordinate) while print-based structures look more to syntactics, a more elaborate and fixed grammar (subordination), because to provide meaning it is dependant more on linguistic structures (rather than on oral performance).

Aggregative rather than analytic

The elements of orally based thought and expression tends to be not so much simple integers as clusters of integers, such as parallel terms or phrases or clauses, antithetical terms or phrases or clauses, epithets. Oral folk prefer, especially in formal discourse, not the soldier, but the brave soldier; not the princess, but the beautiful princess... . Oral expression thus carries a load of epithets and other formulary baggage which high literacy rejects as cumbersome and tiresomely redundant because of its aggregative weight. ... Once a formulary expression has crystallized, it had best be kept intact. “the Glorious revolution of October 26”—USSR epithetic formula

Redundant or “copious”

For literate readers, the reader is able to retrieve the context or meaning by glancing back over the text (backlooping). In oral discourse, the situation is different. There is nothing to backloop into outside of the mind, for the oral utterance has vanished as soon as it is uttered. Hence, the mind must move ahead more slowly, keeping close to the focus of attention much of what it has already dealt with. Redundancy, repetition of the just-said, keeps both speaker and hearer surely on the track. ... It is advantageous for the speaker in oral performance to say the same thing, or equivalently the same thing, two or three times. ... in oral delivery, though a pause may be effective, hesitation is always disabling. Hence it is better to repeat something artfully rather than simply to stop

speaking while fishing for the next idea. Oral cultures encourage fluency, fulsomeness, volubility.

Conservative or traditionalist

Since in a primarily oral culture conceptualized knowledge that is not repeated aloud soon vanished, oral societies must invest great energy in saying over and over again what has been learned arduously over the ages. This need established a highly traditionalist or conservative set of mind that for good reason inhibits intellectual experimentation.

Empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced

For an oral culture learning or knowing means achieving close, empathetic, communal identification with the known. Writing separates the knower from the known and thus sets up conditions for “objectivity,” in the sense of personal disengagement or distancing. In oral performance there is a strong identification between the performer and the subject (hero), and through him of the listeners to the hero. So bound together are the narrator, audience, and the character that in places the narrator speaks as the hero.

from the Introduction to the African Epic of Son-Jara *The Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces*, Vol. 1: 2335-2338

The principal custodians of the oral tradition... are professional bards, known variously as griots, scops, or in Africa as griots. Their role was to recite from memory, on great occasions of state, the oral chronicles and family history of their patrons. They were expected not merely to recall the bare historical narrative, but to endow their recitation with all the power of language they could command, thus creating an ever-developing imaginative expression of the community's historical consciousness.

Epic developed as a series of separate parts (praise poems) like the addition of pearls to a string—accretion. Epic exists as a fusion of three distinct layers:

The narrative framework or overarching “master text”: This framework is composed of structured episodes, and it is the narrator's immediate task to recall these in appropriate sequence. He is at liberty to expand on them in whatever way best suits the context of performance and the character of the audience, employing in the process a number of formulaic devices not only as props to memory but as building blocks in the recreation of the epic. The other two generic layers derive from the condition of oral performance mentioned above: the digressive recitation of praise poems (or “stories” composed independent of the “master text”) that can be inserted where needed or where traditionally they need to appear; and the third layer of songs, performed as autonomous pieces.

Performance of the epic is highly rhythmic, with breath stops, often accentuated by tonal patterns. To these affects must be added movement and gesture, with which the narrator dramatizes action or provides a visual delineation of character—extraliterary aspects of epic performance that evoke the direct relationship of the griot to his audience.