

11 *Almes*
orally delivered. After the speech was delivered, nothing of it remained to work over. What you used for 'study' had to be the text of speeches that had been written down – commonly after delivery and often long after (in antiquity it was not common practice for any but disgracefully incompetent orators to speak from a text prepared verbatim in advance – Ong 1967b, pp. 56–8). In this way, even orally composed speeches were studied not as speeches but as written texts.

Moreover, besides transcription of oral performances such as orations, writing eventually produced strictly written compositions, designed for assimilation directly from the written surface. Such written compositions enforced attention to texts even more, for truly written compositions came into being as texts only, even though many of them were commonly listened to rather than silently read, from Livy's histories to Dante's *Comedia* and beyond (Nelson 1976–7; Bäuml 1980; Goldin 1973; Cormier 1974; Ahern 1982).

DID YOU SAY 'ORAL LITERATURE'?

The scholarly focus on texts had ideological consequences. With their attention directed to texts, scholars often went on to assume, often without reflection, that oral verbalization was essentially the same as the written verbalization they normally dealt with, and that oral art forms were to all intents and purposes simply texts, except for the fact that they were not written down. The impression grew that, apart from the oration (governed by written rhetorical rules), oral art forms were essentially unskillful and not worth serious study.

Not all, however, lived by these assumptions. From the mid-sixteenth century on, a sense of the complex relationships of writing and speech grew stronger (Cohen 1977). But the relentless dominance of (textuality) in the scholarly mind is shown by the fact that to this day no concepts have yet been formed for effectively, let alone gracefully, conceiving of oral art as such without reference, conscious or unconscious, to writing. This is so even though the oral art forms which developed during the tens of thousands of years before writing obviously had no connection with writing at all. We have the term 'literature' which essentially means 'writings' (Latin *litteratura*, from *littera*, letter of the alphabet), to cover a given body of written

materials – English literature, children's literature – but no comparably satisfactory term or concept to refer to a purely oral heritage, such as the traditional oral stories, proverbs, prayers, formulaic expressions (Chadwick 1932–40, *passim*), or other oral productions of, say, the Lakota Sioux in North America or the Mande in West Africa or of the Homeric Greeks.

As noted above, I style the orality of a culture totally untouched by any knowledge of writing or print, 'primary orality'. It is 'primary' by contrast with the (secondary orality) of present-day high-technology culture, in which a new orality is sustained by telephone, radio, television, and other electronic devices that depend for their existence and functioning on writing and print. Today primary oral culture in the strict sense hardly exists, since every culture knows of writing and has some experience of its effects. Still, to varying degrees many cultures and subcultures, even in a high-technology ambiance, preserve much of the mind-set of primary orality.

The purely oral tradition or primary orality is not easy to conceive of accurately and meaningfully. Writing makes 'words' appear similar to things because we think of words as the visible marks signaling words to decoders: we can see and touch such inscribed 'words' in texts and books. Written words are residue. Oral tradition has no such residue or deposit. When an often-told oral story is not actually being told, all that exists of it is the potential in certain human beings to tell it. We (those who read texts such as this) are for the most part so resolutely literate that we seldom feel comfortable with a situation in which verbalization is, so little thing-like as it is in oral tradition. As a result – though at a slightly reduced frequency now – scholarship in the past has generated such monstrous concepts as 'oral literature'. This strictly preposterous term remains in circulation today even among scholars now more and more acutely aware how embarrassingly it reveals our inability to represent to our own minds a heritage of verbally organized materials except as some variant of writing, even when they have nothing to do with writing at all. The title of the great Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature at Harvard University monumentalizes the state of awareness of an earlier generation of scholars rather than that of its recent curators.

One might argue (as does Finnegan 1977, p. 16) that the term