

The Oral and the Written in a Period of Globalisation

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Abstract: The author deals with the effects of globalisation on the oral and written expressive forms rooted in oral antecedents. He develops a context for retrieving and transmitting the oral as a discourse under the regime of globalisation by arguing that technologies can be exploited for preserving the oral traditions for their dissemination.

One can initiate the discussion hinted by the title above by asking a very basic question. What is globalisation doing to traditional expressive forms? One can definitely say that proliferation of global systems in communication is a definite engine of change. Globalisation, among other things, driven by technological revolutions poses a different challenge to expressive forms rooted in oral antecedents. The question arises is globalisation a better/worse option for preservation and dissemination of the oral? Is globalisation, as it is feared in some quarters, would forever erase the oral? I propose to develop a context for retrieving and transmitting the oral as a discourse under the regime of globalisation by arguing that technologies can be exploited in preserving the oral or creating an archive for its dissemination. As Roger Hewitt points out:

“What also needs recovering is the folklorist’s nose for expressive forms—oral narratives, jokes, sayings, chants etc—without the folklorist’s prejudice against the technological: an approach that melds a sensitivity to creativity in language, with popular cultural analysis, a sense of the contemporary, a sense of agency, within an apprehension of culture not as ‘tradition’ but rather, as the bricoleurs’s bag, and meaning as created as much as ‘given’” (Hewitt 2003: 197).

‘Bricoleur’ and the related term ‘bricolage’ were first used by Claude Levi-Strauss to explain the organisation of mythic thoughts in societies that were perceived to be primitive. Mythic narratives were a kind of ‘intellectual bricolage’ assembled by combining existing stories, narrative remnants and other residual fragments in a given culture to evolve new narrative edifices. Kristin Kuttuma in her article “Changes in Folk Culture and Folklore Ensembles” points out that tradition is not a cultural given but a cultural construct:

...invented at a certain period of time under certain circumstances. It is not relevant to judge whether a traditional phenomenon... is genuine or spurious. Tradition is neither genuine nor spurious because it is not handed down from the past as a thing or collection of things, but it is symbolically reinvented in an ongoing present... Tradition is not passed on from generation to generation in language, art, and music as a time-honoured body of knowledge and values, but it is rather in a constant stage of disorder and confusion, about to disintegrate under the pressure of change. And members of the society strive to restore and maintain tradition in new rituals, displays, and in diverse forms of entertainment (<http://www.folklore.ee/folklore/authors/kristin.htm>).

Tracing the etymology of the written/oral dichotomy, one recalls that the “written” and the “oral” as cultural denominators, in the wake of European colonialism, had been identified with the civilised and less-civilised or the primitive societies respectively. This dichotomy was further engendered by colonial anthropology. Writing, as a skill and a tool for transcription, has privileged the one who has mastered it. The oral is deontologised and is deprived of its internal meanings being reduced only to some transcribed form in the written. We know that the project of European Enlightenment started with the culture of “writing” supported

by the philosophy of reason that has proved or disproved everything to be true or false in using the logic of cause and effect. The tool of empiricism, product of a written culture does not make sense of a culture that makes itself manifest and meaningful through memory, reiteration and performance.

As pointed out by Fuery and Mansfield, "...in the wake of humanism, European culture so idealised the 'human' as an abstract theoretical quality that it became divorced from the simple material reality of membership of human race" (Fuery & Mansfield 2000: 07).

Globalisation, besides its economic implications, has forced itself into debates on legitimatising or otherwise of discourses, engaging broadly with economic liberalisation and national sovereignty, consumerism and its limits, commodity fetishisation and commodifications of cultures, and with theories of modernity and postmodernity. Such debates have deepened the issues within humanities in refixing and interrogating the cultural canon, their legitimacy and methods of critical enquiry. If the humanities still under the sway of Western Enlightenment ideals have culturally non-specific yearnings for universal equality, peace, and justice, in a postmodern turn of events, how do they then address the question of oral cultures? If modernity has divided and hierarchised the oral and the written cultural forms, post-structuralism, following Derridean deconstruction, has subverted hierarchy and subsumed the divide in declaring everything as a text. In the evolving definition of culture, the field is the locus around which the dynamics of culture have been debated. With the notion of culture lies implicit the idea of the field, and field here is not in the sense of a loosely constituted entity but a cultural text. Clifford Geertz, in his 'The Balinese Cockfight as Play', reads his field as text and shows how apparently disparate elements of Balinese culture create a fabric of meaning and belief:

Like any art form – for that, finally, is that we are dealing with – the cockfight renders ordinary, everyday experience comprehensible by presenting it in terms of acts and objects ...the cockfight is "really real" only to the cocks – it does not kill anyone, castrate anyone, reduce anyone to animal status ...what it does is what, for other peoples with other temperaments and other conventions, Lear and Crime and Punishment do; it catches up these themes—death, masculinity, rage, pride, loss, beneficence, change—and ordering them into an encompassing structure, presents them in such a way as to throw into relief a particular view of their essential nature (Geertz1990: 119).

However, the historical difference between oral and written cultures, as we know, point at the superiority of the later over the former. Although the written has always been technologically strengthened, the oral has been encoded into the logic of the written without having a choice of its own. Does the digitised culture which is written-derived provides some choice to the oral? Can the oral ever get out of the commands of the written? These are some of the questions that I would like to problematise in considering a oral-derived cultural poetics that can hold good in a digitised and transcultural televised world.

Written literature as the manifest form of creativity, although carrying the impulses and modes of the oral, is always privileged as the signifying face of a given culture. As a derivative and hybrid form, it forever strives to expand its parameters and looks for paradigms that act as counterpoints to subvert its own limits. In doing so, it conveniently embeds issues or themes coming from other sources such as race, ethnicity, gender, and folklore. On the other hand, the oral, unlike the written that is historical as well as contemporary, is something from the past that is temporal and dated, hence its relevance and revitalisation is often pushed down by the written. Speaking to a UNESCO assembly in 2001,

the Spanish novelist, Juan Goytisolo commented upon the attitudes that hinder a deeper understanding of folk and traditional cultures in the contemporary world. While societies are “anxious for instruction” about the past, he said, a mistaken perception about traditional knowledge as frozen in time and ruled by “competitive norms” of authenticity prevent many from grasping the relevance of folk knowledge in all its multiple dimensions (Maribel 2006: 01). Theoretically, even if we have discovered its patterns and ethno-specific values, as a performative and culturally suggestive text, the oral is generative and not something, as believed, forever frozen or fossilised in time and space.

However, one has to be careful not to predicate appreciative paradigms that distort or displace the essence of those forms being appreciated. Encountering contradictions and confusion in documentation of texts derived from oral traditions is quite common. The noted American scholar, John Miles Foley, points out as late as the final decade of the last century, that little prior work have been done on oral traditional aesthetics and “it would be too easy to fall into the clutches of one or another current literary theory and to communicate whatever can be discovered about oral traditional art solely through the exclusivist metaphor of that particular approach” (1991: xii-xiii). It is not possible to produce an oral poetics from within the precincts of a wholly written culture. The world of words means two different things for the oral and the written discourses. While in traditional oral discourse, the word is a powerful tool that promotes and negotiates a sense of community and collective harmony integrating the individual to the larger reality around him, in the written discourse the word is basically a tool for subjective expression. Any approach to oral and oral-derived literatures should be initiated by trying to understand how it is different from mainstream literary and appreciative paradigms in the periphery of which it circulates. Paula Gunn Allen, a Native American critic of mixed Laguna-Sioux blood, deeply entrenched in her oral tradition, tells us that the “purpose of Native American literature is never one of pure self-expression”:

The ‘private soul at any public wall’ is a concept that is so alien to native thought as to constitute an absurdity. The tribes do not celebrate the individual’s ability to feel emotion... The tribes seek through song, ceremony, legend, sacred stories (myths) and tales to embody, articulate, and to share reality, to verbalize the sense of the majesty and reverent mystery of all things, and to actualize, in language, those truth of being and experience that give to humanity its greatest significance and dignity (Allen 1975: 112-113).

Let me first consider the concepts of oral and oral-derived literature.

Literatures that are traditionally unwritten and originally belonged to non-alphabetical cultures are oral literatures. Thus ideally oral literatures should be orally composed, transmitted and performed without any contact with writing. However, as civilisation traverses the course from pre-alphabetical to alphabetical societies, the ideal of an absolute orality is getting increasingly hard to be realised. Thus the exact scope of the term “oral” is gradually changing. Verbal texts can be accessible in the written form but can belong to an oral creative moment in a given society, when the texts are learned, transmitted and performed orally. Thus one can say that oral literature usually includes literature “originally composed and performed orally that has reached us through written transmission, like some of the early epics” (Finnegan 1992:11). Thus the idea of pure and uncontaminated oral culture as the primary reference point for the discussion of, for example, oral poetry is increasingly becoming a myth.

The printed representation of a text is very different from a performative verbal text that is basically acts bound up with extra-verbal referents. Experiencing the printing text, even with a sense of its shaping culture, is clearly different from listening to a verbal text in a performative milieu. As Arnold Krupat points out, it is hard to “believe that our textual

culture, although presently restructuring itself to replace print with printout, can develop an oral poetic. But that is not to say that the idea of an oral poetic cannot be effective in checking our tendency to project alphabetic categories on non-alphabetic practice..." though "...our script mark on the page is a pale trace of what their voices performed (Krupat 1985: 117). Moreover, what needs to be considered is the fact that in cultures where large volume of information might be lost irrecoverably, existing recordings are of utmost importance. The concept of oral-derived also allows us to examine the traditional features of the work alongside its post-traditional characteristics. If the traditional features are preserved in recorded versions, the post-traditional features are manifest in the contemporary poetic and cultural practices of a community or a tribe in the context of a changing socio-cultural milieu. The Assamese Bihu songs provide a good illustration of this point. From being a part of a traditional pastoral festival involving a cross section of tribes and communities in the open fields in rural settings, it has evolved into a medium of Assamese linguistic and cultural assertion by the urban and semi-urban middle class and in turn its influences have flowed back to the villages thus distinctly modifying the Bihu songs. This circulation of social energy is to be noted in that the folk often becomes a cultural commodity that in the process of modifying itself also modifies the social and political concerns of a community and hence is capable of providing a cultural poetics for social communication.

The inherent metonymic meaning of an oral-derived form, while dependent on the surface denotations for a viable conduit, remains immanent, looming over the textual score and enriching it associatively.

This larger traditional and cultural structure is the extra-textual domain unique to oral-derived forms. As Foley points out, "...the idiom is metonymic, summoning conventional connotations to conventional structures, we may say that the meaning it conveys is principally inherent" (Foley 1991: 08). Let me illustrate this point by a translated version of an example of an oral verse from the Bodo tribe of Assam:

The Wild betel leaves in the garden corner.
You may mark, but loveliness your face wears.
In the maiden's looms are the reeds.
If you want to set home with me.
Do not cultivate such habits.
The shrub across the pond.
If you want to take me, get a necklace of gold (Boro 1995:36).

One who knows the qualities of wild betel leaves will at once understand the essence of the opening. It is generally dark green unlike the usual lighter shade and is known for pungent taste. Hence, though the youth may be dark and apparently wild, he is the maid' chosen one. The third line works at two levels; it is the girl's information to the youth that the reeds are still visible in the girl's loom, and thus it is not necessary for him to move around the girls at work at their looms in the pretext of seeing what they are weaving. Secondly, it also signifies that the weaving has not much advanced since the reeds are visible, and thus their love too has not much advanced to be taken for granted. The sixth line by pointing out that the shrub is across the pond refers to the fact that it is not easily within reach. Similarly, the girl who is singing the song, is not easily within the reach, and would consider the boy if offered a "gold necklace." In this poem, the larger traditional and cultural structure remains immanent. In its original creative moment, and later at its performative stage, the obvious is left out, for the performer and the participants come form a shared context and brought their common knowledge into both rendition and reception, which is representative of their cultural reality. It is this aspect that imparts a minimal style to oral-derived forms. It would be, thus,

inaccurate to appropriate them to forms like imagist poetry. Oral-derived forms do not lie on subjective origination but is part of a larger and shared socio-cultural enactment.

This brings us to another important concern of oral-derived forms: the individual and the community. Oral-derived forms, rooted as they are in the community, can never be one of pure self-expression but “to bring isolated private self into harmony and balance...” (Allen 1975: 112-113). The abundance of love songs in oral-derived forms amongst the Assamese, Bodos, Misings and other communities in Assam may seem to be a celebration of individual emotions, but as Hiren Gohain points out, “even the dance and songs of joy are not spontaneous and haphazard. They too have a season, the rituals of the accompanying festivals, and the faithfully followed movements of dance. The words of the songs and the poems of such communal events are transfused with the sanctity of the events” (Gohain 1993: 12). Love songs like Mising oi-ni:toms are collective renditions and are mostly part of collective festivities. Love songs can be said to integrate individual emotions into collective expression, and bring that emotion into balance and harmony with the normative requirement of the community and reflect emotions intrinsic to human situation. These songs of love cannot be ascribed to any specific originator, but to the continuum of oral culture. As the noted Mising scholar Nahendra Padun has pointed out, “whoever sings oi-ni:tom own upto the language and the thoughts in it – it becomes the language of his soul. Whosoever listens to oi-ni:tom also adopts it as the expression of his soul” (Padun 1980 : 02). The pronouns like “you” and “I” are not expressive of specific personas, but are generic terms inclusive of both renderers and listeners.

The foregoing analysis primarily points out two important aspects of the oral-derived poetics that it is co-produced culturally by all members of the community and that its subtext is equally important with the surface text. These texts are dynamic as they embody the very inner impulse of individual emotions that can be accommodated within the community norms. And the spoken word is sacrosanct:

Let me cleave words,
Sharp little words
Like the firewood
That I split with my axe (Lowenstein 1985: 190).

This example from an Inuit oral-derived poem clearly suggests that words need referents of action or performance to bear meaning:

Words do not come after or apart from what naturally is, but are themselves natural genes, tribal history in the bodies of the people. People are born into their heritage and tribal tongue. For the most part, they do not create words any more than they give birth to themselves or make up nature. Names can come from dreams, personal ties, external events, medicine people or ancestors. Singers sing song drawing tonally on the voice as an interpretive human instrument for words living in the mouth and body, pitch modulates meaning, accents give cadence to meaning drawing together. Instead of rhyming words... the songs rhyme perceptions, moods, natural objects, the world as word... (Lincoln 1983: 47).

Thus oral is always activity-oriented or performative in that words become alive with meaning. In a globalised and technology driven world we are better equipped today to capture/record performative acts that are both temporal and permanent in the domain of the oral bringing plurality of performances/renderings within a paradigm not to cleave difference of meaning or theme except of style in celebrating the dynamism of a particular oral form. Going back to the Bihu example, I would suggest that if we have the means to preserve let us

say the changing form of Bihu songs and performances it will not only help us understanding the transformation of the form from its rural, pastoral background to becoming an expression of the urban middle-class political assertiveness, but also the way it transforms the community's aspirations.

This dynamism of the folk is absent in the written because the oral is equipped with the tools of word and performance. One of the fears that is expressed today is that Bihu is becoming overtly commercialised and has lost its cultural significance. I don't agree with this. Folklore and the folk are beyond rigid connotation and one must look beyond the archaic folk/unsophisticated/primal versus the sophisticated/cultured/urbane binaries. Folklore is intrinsically linked up with agriculture to industrialisation as well as rural to urban shift as new genres of folklore are being constantly generated. Folklore serves as means of internal interactive communication in particular groups and communities and folklore structure may vary considerably. One of the important developments in recent time is the generation of what can be termed as fusion folklore, especially in emerging cultural communities in urban locales. An important impact on folk forms is the impact of global expressive forms and the interactive generation of new forms, especially amongst the youths. Thus in Assam we have songs sung to the beats and tunes of Bihu accompanied by electronic percussion and stringed instruments which have proliferated all over the state. This is emerging as a distinctly new genre. On the other hand we have essentially folk derived western music of Bob Dylan having a huge impact in Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya in Northeast India, with the annual Dylan festival being a cultural landmark of the place. These and similar other manifestations are new badges that are sported by an emerging youth culture and form a part of an essential emerging folklore. Globalisation also means being open to new ideas and other cultural inputs. If Bihu song is changing it does not mean that it is being influenced only by outside ideas it is also influencing others because folk forms are capable of absorbing the new while readjusting with the changing conditions of social reality, transmitting its own ideas to other cultures.

This two-way flow of ideas and cultures is also the feature of globalisation. There is a need therefore to understand how the oral culture is potentially equipped to negotiate with the global. If we consider that an oral-cultural poetics is dynamic as it sets a community's aspirations with changing times I think our understanding of the global in the context of the oral and the written will give us a different perspective in understanding our reality. An oral-derived cultural poetics needs to be explored within the domain of the local-global nexus so that globalisation instead being a threat could be considered as an opportunity. It is a matter of choosing one's perspective and working from an alternative viewpoint!

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