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# Rewards and Issues in Studying Oral Literature: Some personal reflections

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## 1. Introduction

This paper is not attempting some organised overview of the extensive subject of oral literature; even if I was capable of that, space limitations would forbid. Rather it consists merely of comments from my own experience of studying aspects of oral literature over several decades, principally in Africa but also in Fiji, Britain, and comparatively. This began in the early 1960s with anthropological fieldwork on Limba story-telling in Sierra Leone, though before that, but unawares, I was also in a way confronted with oral forms during my earlier training in classical Latin and Greek literature.<sup>1</sup>

My paper therefore has a limited focus. But I surmise that the rewards and issues I have encountered may not be purely individual, for similar themes emerged in several of the presentations by both younger and more senior scholars in the workshop from which this special issue derives.

## 2. Rewards

The serious study of any subject no doubt brings its own rewards. But there is surely something special in the subject we are considering here. So let me at the outset draw attention to the title of the venture that has brought us together – the World Oral Literature Project. *Oral literature* is surely a significant and inspiring concept, conveying something of special intellectual, humanistic and moral value. The very term pulls us out of the cold assumption that only in written text can human imagination and wisdom be clothed, opening a door to the vast oral creativity of humankind so often devalued in the print-dominated outlook of western scholarship.

To speak of ‘oral literature’ is already to widen our intellectual horizons and move us beyond the limited confines of the written canon. The term

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<sup>1</sup> This paper partly interlocks with a companion piece in a previous LDD issue (Finnegan 2008, which gives references to my earlier work), but differs in that here the focus is on ‘oral literature’ and its study rather than on language.

allows us to approach the arts of the word in a worldwide frame and see them in new ways, stimulating the exploration and appreciation of forms which might otherwise remain scattered or dismissed as of parochial interest only. I have found it moving to hear how collectors and analysts working in remote areas – remote, that is, from what have traditionally been regarded as the ‘centres of scholarship’ – have gained confidence in their subject-matter by its recognition not as the output of some trivial passing expression or artless local tradition, but as rightly classed under the internationally understood heading of ‘oral literature’ shared by scholars across the world.

Looking to oral literature goes beyond just a quest for intellectual understanding, important though that is. It can also open our imaginations to the artful subtleties of human thought and expression: in performance, in artistic cooperation or individual inspiration, in verbal wizardry. It implies an essentially humanistic vision of research and of humankind. For throughout the world we see people not only engaged in suffering, struggle, love, longing, humour or conflict, but clothing their experience in deeply human words of wisdom, wit and beauty.

And this in turn can have ethical and political rewards, for it widens the sphere of cultural products considered *worth* taking seriously. At one time a common view of Africa and other areas of the world labelled ‘primitive’ or, more politely, ‘non-western’, was that here was no true culture, literature or poetry. Nor, in the more extreme views, were the inhabitants fully human or capable of individual thought or artistry. It is noteworthy how directly those with interests in oral literature were in a position to dispute this. Already by the mid-19th century a volume entitled *African Native Literature* had among its key hopes that it would ‘introduce the reader ... into the inward world of Negro mind and Negro thoughts’ and their capacity to express ‘human thoughts’, ‘refuting the old-fashioned doctrine of an essential inequality of the Negroes with the rest of mankind’ (Koelle 1854: vi – vii). Scholars of oral literature have over the years challenged the ethnocentric scale of values that sets the products of western high culture at the pinnacle of the hierarchy. The study of oral literature has linked too into the move to reveal and value the cultures of minority and submerged sections of society – the forgotten, the marginalised, the despised or just those that in particular contexts have remained hidden from social recognition or scholarly concern, whether on a world scale or in our own backyards.

The serious study of oral literature is unquestionably a time-consuming and demanding business. But those who participate in it can find among their many rewards an active participation in the democratic ethos and a sense of service in bringing to light and endowing with dignity what had before been hidden: both a duty and, I would suggest, a privilege.

### 3. Issues

Such rewards spring readily to mind. Perhaps everyone involved in this kind of endeavour has in some way been touched by them. But it can be tempting just to leave them there, even exaggerate them in a facile and over-romantic way. For we equally have the duty to think robustly about the issues involved in the study of oral literature – intellectual, ethical, practical. Let me pick on just a few that I have found myself confronting.

#### 3.1. ‘Oral literature’: the depths of a simple-sounding term

The first returns to the question of terminology. Like others I have puzzled over how best to describe the material we study: as ‘folk tales’, for example, ‘stories’, ‘narrative’, ‘oral tradition’, ‘folklore’, ‘texts’, ‘verbal art’? All are commonly used terms in the field, each with its own connotations. ‘Oral literature’ is no exception. It may have become a recognised organising concept with many merits. But it too is a loaded term which deserves further scrutiny.

As I gradually discovered, it goes back further than I at first realised. The 1880s saw Paul Sebillot’s *Littérature orale de la Haute-Bretagne*, an influential collection and discussion of local stories, songs and proverbs: he was already – as we do now – emphasising the urgency of collecting this rich ‘littérature orale et traditionnelle’ before it disappeared (Sebillot 1881: vii). Or again, an 1894 edition of Angolan folktales (Chatelain 1894: 16) insisted that:

the only way to get at the character, the moral and intellectual make-up, of the races and tribes, is to make a thorough study of their social and religious institutions, and of their unwritten, oral literature.

He and others saw these oral forms not only as a substitute for written literature but also as a means, otherwise unavailable, for getting inside the ‘inward mind’ of Africans.

Literary historians also started talking about ‘oral literature’, notably in the great three-volume work *The Growth of Literature* by H. M. and N. K. Chadwick (1932-40), a work seminal to my own outlook. This produced not only a remarkable comparative conspectus set in world perspective, with plentiful oral examples, but also directly disputed the assumption that ‘literature’ had to be written. Chadwick points out (1939: 77):

In ‘civilised’ countries we are inclined to associate literature with writing; but such an association is accidental. ... Millions of people throughout Asia, Polynesia, Africa and even Europe who practise the art of literature have no knowledge of letters. Writing is unessential to either the composition or the preservation of literature.

A different impetus for the term came in the work of Milman Parry and Albert Lord. The now classic account in Lord's *The Singer of Tales* (1960) was based on their 1930s field-research on South Slavic oral heroic songs, using the term 'oral literature' to consider these alongside Homeric and mediaeval literary texts. Their analysis revealed that these lengthy oral poems were created not through prior composition or by repeating memorised texts but through a type of improvisation where the singer was able to compose during the act of performance by drawing on a repertoire of formulaic expressions, put together differently on each occasion. Lord's oral-formulaic analysis (or 'oral theory' as it came to be called) became hugely influential across a wide range of disciplines, giving a fresh stimulus to studies of oral literature and a new light on its nature. The conclusion seemed to be that here was a distinct category: a widely found 'traditional' form, definitively identified by being both formulaic and based on composition-during-performance.

By the 1960s and 1970s the term 'oral literature' thus seemed well established, in some circles at least, with a clear body of material assigned to it. But there were also other inputs into its study – too numerous to summarise here – and both the concept and its coverage remained controversial. Increasing knowledge and field-based research radically undermined some of the once confident generalisations, and scholars are now doubtful about pictures of oral literature as necessarily 'traditional', clearly distinctive or invariably based on oral-formulaic 'composition-in-performance' (there turn out to be other compositional modes too). The trend now is towards a focus on diversity, cultural specificities and the fluid boundaries of what had once seemed a solid object of study.

In particular, there are issues over combining 'oral' with 'literature'. I am not thinking here of the often-cited etymological objection that 'literature', derived from the Latin *litterae* (letters, writing), cannot by definition be *unwritten*: this always seems to me irrelevant pedantry. More pertinent is the argument that using the term 'literature' risks over-emphasising the textual elements within oral delivery and encouraging over-facile equations with genres of the western literary canon. There is also the view among some scholars that the collocation 'oral literature' has unavoidably negative overtones, implying that here is only a qualified – rather than 'normal' – form of literature. For this reason some now prefer 'orature' as conflating the ideas of literature and of orality into a single word, something positive in its own right. Amidst such debates, 'oral literature' is obviously not an uncontested term, and to adopt it is to make a deliberate choice.

The word 'oral' has also itself become a focus of controversy. Over the last 50 years or so it has acquired increasing visibility, with many scholars now involved in some aspect or other of its study. In one way this is greatly to be welcomed, revealing oral expression as a valuable and intrinsically

rewarding subject for investigation. But it has also been tempting to exaggerate its distinctiveness, reifying ‘the oral’ and ‘orality’ in a somewhat essentialist and backwards-looking way. It is still sometimes brought into service for what many would regard as the outdated wholesale oppositions which set orality against literacy, primitive versus civilised, or tradition versus modernity, implying a homogeneity in each scarcely supported by the mounting evidence of intermingling and diversity. These ideas are still debated. But nowadays most scholars of oral literature tend to be sceptical of generalised conclusions about ‘orality’ or of the image of the ‘oral’ as intrinsically imbued with some mystical closeness to nature that takes us back to a romanticised vanished past.

Indeed many would now argue – as I would – that the apparently ‘new’ as well as the claimed ‘old’ forms are equally worth documenting, and that it can be unbalanced to look just to the ‘disappearing’ expertise of elders when equally interesting forms may be emerging among younger generations. I am conscious that the political songs or radio recitations of 50 years ago in Africa were at the time often seen as of less interest than myths told in villages. By now however we recognise what a valuable addition their study can be to our knowledge of the oral literature of the period, just as we would be grateful indeed if Sebillot had supplemented his excellent documentation of French peasants’ tales in 1881 by further material about other, less ‘traditional’, oral forms current at the time. By the same token, perhaps we could say the same of the rock lyrics, rap performances or humorous tales of today that may in later years be looked back to as among the (by then) vanishing forms to treasure. At any rate I see oral literature as many-sided and unending, constantly changing as well as continuing. Debates will undoubtedly continue as to which studies should have priority, but I am certainly sceptical of the once confident claims that oral literature is somehow intrinsically insulated in some pure oral sphere uncontaminated by other media and that that alone is what we should try to capture. No longer just associated with the mystique of the ‘primitive’, the term oral is now often taken to include studies of radio and audio recordings and the fascinating interaction with written, electronic and audio-visual forms – even detected in the poetics of cellular phone speak (Kaschula 2009).

And then let me return to ‘literature’. One issue taken seriously by some is that to use this term is to impose ethnocentric written models on forms that may include other elements than the purely verbal. Laying the emphasis primarily on ‘literary’ text – seeing songs for example as consisting essentially of their verbal lyrics – risks blinding us to the multimodality of oral delivery and falling back into the potent textual paradigm that draws attention to linear print or script and away from the complexities of active performance. The other side of that coin, however, is that ‘literature’ brings our subject matter into the setting of worldwide scholarship and unlike such

words as ‘tradition’ or ‘folklore’ immediately suggests connotations of creativity and of artistry. Either way it is no neutral term, for it highlights the *literary* dimensions of the material under study (which may of course also have other properties), whilst also implying something of value and dignity – an advantage for some purposes no doubt, and arguably a good reason for its use, but at the same time carrying evaluative overtones of which we should be aware when we deploy it.

So though in some ways the perfect term, ‘oral literature’ also hides controversies and issues within it. With this background, I myself end up a touch cautious about it – or rather, believe that if we choose to use it (which I do) we need also to remember that it is neither a self-evident nor a limpid term. In one sense, this is part of its strength. For it can only add to our insights into the complex treasures of human verbal vocal expression to be sensitive to the debates and counter-debates which have surrounded its study.

### 3.2 What do we capture and study?

One key issue that no student of oral literature can fail to be concerned with is just *what* it is that we are studying or collecting: what kind of thing is it? In the case of oral literature, this is by no means fully agreed. At one time the general assumption was that it was primarily writable texts. As described in a previous LDD paper (Finnegan 2008), this was my own initial presupposition when embarking on fieldwork in the 1960s, a natural one perhaps in view of my classical Greek and Latin textual training.

By now the perspective has changed. Scholars focus not just on textual content but also, crucially, on how it is delivered. It was no accident that the first presentation in the 2009 World Oral Literature Workshop featured ritual drumming and chanting, for both in that gathering and beyond many now take it for granted that ‘oral literature’ is a matter *not* just of verbal text but of performance.

I have certainly found this central in my own work. As explained earlier (Finnegan 2008, also more fully Finnegan 1967), my initial fieldwork on Limba story-telling showed me that looking to the text alone failed to capture the stories’ life and reality: the manipulation of voice, gesture, song, facial expression, dramatic characterisation and audience interaction, as well as the subtle non-verbal intimations of humour, fantasy, pathos or ironic comment. To narrow all this into the restricted medium of fixed written lines on a page was to miss the substance of these multidimensional multi-participant performances.

Or again, take the Fijian dance-song (*meke*) that from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present has been pre-eminent as their highest oral literary genre. It *can* be

represented as verbal text, a narrative poem. But equally integral to the form is not only musical performance – choral singing and percussion – but also coordinated dancing by a line of joint performers and visual display in the performers' costume, ornaments and oiled decorated bodies. The work is composed in advance by an inspired expert who receives it in dream or trance, and the public event preceded by long rehearsals to perfect the performance. Once again, to reduce this many-sided existence to words alone would be to miss its full reality.

By now this scarcely needs arguing. Over the decades that I have been studying oral literature one of the most notable changes has been the rise of performance studies, directing our interest to the multisensory features that give substance to what we study. However, taking on the implications in the context of recording and preservation raises practical as well as intellectual questions. What you capture depends not only on assumptions about the nature of the subject matter but also, and linked to this, on the conditions of collection and the available technology.

So it is scarcely surprising that for many centuries the focus has been on verbal text, mediated as this has been through the long-dominant conventions and technologies of writing. In practice this is actually still a common technique for documenting oral literature. It is utilised in varying ways. Oral texts have been recorded from dictation, conflated from memory (as plot summaries for example), expanded by editors, or specially written by contributors from diverse backgrounds. In earlier periods one fashion was to set local assistants and schoolchildren to writing texts, often on the assumption that 'tribal' cultures were homogeneous so that any informant would do equally well. All such techniques raise, though sometimes quietly conceal, the still-pressing issue of textualisation – the transformation of oral delivery into writing. Parallel difficulties still confront today's researchers as they engage in the commonly-followed process of transforming audio or video recordings into written text. As well elucidated during the workshop, such transcription is far from unproblematic for many choices are inevitably made about how performance is to be reproduced in writing. It is only too easy when looking at the neat resultant print to forget the performed reality of the original and ignore the intervening hands and far-from-neutral social conventions that shaped the final text.

This links into the continually knotty issue of how particular cases of oral literature come to be collected: how elicited, in what context and – importantly – what parties were in a position to shape the outcome. It is worth alluding to a couple of examples, to remind us that complex backgrounds can lie behind apparently limpid outcomes.

Take the case of the famous *Mwindo* epic, a long-established example of African epic tradition. The text resulted from a protracted search by the

European collector, Daniel Biebuyck. He was convinced that the Congolese Nyanga people must have an epic and had long been trying to record it. Every potential narrator he approached had proved ‘too old and too confused ... did not remember the complete text’, or was ‘simply uncooperative’ (Biebuyck and Mateene 1969: vi). At last he found the 50-year old She-Karisi Rureke, someone accustomed to reciting separate episodes though he had never before put them together into a sustained performance. However, he was persuaded to perform over the course of 12 days. The resulting text was recorded in writing from his recitations and published with a 100-page translation as *The Mwindo Epic from the Banyanga* (Biebuyck and Mateene 1969 – Rureke’s name did not figure on the title page). Biebuyck rejected the short episodes of some other narrators as not, apparently, congruent with Rureke’s version, but did subsequently publish several other similar texts, some of them written and one at least supplied by the native assistant who had been working for him and was familiar with what he was looking for (Biebuyck 1972, 1978).

A more extreme case is the myth of *Kaunitoni*, still publicised as the origin myth of the Fijians. This recounts how they originated in Egypt then travelled via Tanganyika and sailed towards the rising sun in their great canoe, the *Kaunitoni*. They were driven by a storm to Fiji where they finally settled, the ancestors of the Fijians of today. That might seem to be that – an established instance of oral literature documented from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. But it is worth pausing over how it was recorded and from whom (well described in France 1966). An anthropologist named Basil Thomson was in Fiji in the 1890s looking for an origin myth and in 1892 organised a competition in the Fijian-language paper *Na Mata* to find one. The winning entry was the *Kaunitoni* narrative, almost certainly written by Thomson’s clerk. The further background was that history lessons in the mission schools were at the time teaching of African origins, equating Fijian with Tanganyikan place names and drawing a connection with ancient Egyptian customs – all well reflected in the *Kaunitoni* narrative as it was written for Thomson, by now part of the accepted repertoire.

Nowadays we might be more circumspect – or at least transparent – about our collecting processes. But unconscious presuppositions and self-fulfilling prophecies about what we are likely to find are still, I believe, something to be watched for. It remains a useful precept always to clarify in what circumstances any documented item of oral literature was collected and from whom, and, in one’s own case, to ensure that such information is added to any publication or deposit.

Writing is of course not the only medium and by now we are also turning to audio and video. Being able to capture, preserve and analyse through the multimodal technologies of today gives a different perspective on the essential nature of oral literature – on the mode(s) in which it exists. This has brought

something of a revolution in the assessment and recording of oral literature. But we also need to be cautious about congratulating ourselves too readily on this achievement. In practice, the textual paradigm still often reigns supreme – in books, in archives, in our own research, and in the verbal transcriptions selected for storage and scrutiny. Writing and its associated practices and institutions retain a deep hold and I surmise that for all the grand talk of new technologies, much of our oral literature will for some time still materialise in verbal-text format with all the strengths and weaknesses that this implies.

That said, we should indeed welcome the opportunities afforded by modern information technology. It offers vast potential resources for capturing, studying and, notably, storing and distributing oral literature. As I know well from constant approaches from researchers worldwide, the publication of oral literary forms has been restricted in the past, with publishers unwilling to incur the expense of hard-copy reproduction, especially for cases which they see as lying outside the mainstream of European cultural traditions. Now, however, not only can electronic capture be achieved relatively cheaply but it potentially opens up access for the many researchers in Africa and elsewhere eager to enhance their knowledge but unable to obtain – or afford – hard-copy publications. In web sites like the open-access resources at the Center for Studies in Oral Tradition at the University of Missouri <[www.oraltradition.org](http://www.oraltradition.org)> or the series to be developed between the World Oral Literature Project and Open Book Publishers, <[www.openbookpublishers.com](http://www.openbookpublishers.com)>, electronic technologies offer opportunities for international publication and distribution in ways before impossible. Furthermore they can convey multimedia as well as textual dimensions, making it possible to build in performance and reveal multisided subtleties that were no doubt implicitly part of the participants' experience but not overtly captured for scrutiny and explicit recognition. As it is aptly summarised on the World Oral Literature Project website <[www.oralliterature.org/research/publications.html](http://www.oralliterature.org/research/publications.html)>:

Until recently, prohibitive publishing costs made the dissemination of such unique literary traditions unthinkable, but with print-on-demand technology combined with online delivery of multimedia content, it is possible for oral literatures to reach a wider audience.

Drawing on audio-video resources might thus seem to solve the problems of what is left out in written records – welcome indeed. But there are of course still issues to confront. One is just what elements are selected to capture: it is never possible to catch 'the whole' and we are deceiving ourselves if we think this is what we are doing. In audio, is it the dominant voice or also the background murmuring or audience input? In film/video, what choices should be made about where and on whom the focus should lie: the lead performer? Secondary or backing groups? The audience who may be an essential element

in the performance as a whole? The final product may also be shaped by choices over processing and editing where some parties in the decision-making may well be more powerful than others.

Because multimedia technologies have the potential to capture the many-sided aspects of dynamic performance they allow a different perspective on just what oral literature essentially is. It becomes possible to argue that performance lies at the heart and that *this* is the oral literature we must capture and preserve. Unsurprisingly, some scholars incline to define it primarily in these terms, as in Graham Furniss's 'Oral literature exists only in the here and now' (2004: 47) or Robert Cancel's 'There is no verbal art outside of performance' (2004: 315). In some ways I applaud that viewpoint. But there are issues around that too. We surely do not wish totally to lose the concept of textuality and textualisation. As some scholars rightly point out, the concept of 'mental text' held in a performer's mind may be another element to consider (Honko 2000). And should we also be thinking about what lies in common between different performances of what in some sense could be regarded as the same work, whether this is short sung lyric or lengthy epic text?

The current focus on multimodal performance also raises the intractable question of just where the 'oral' begins and ends. If oral literature is multisensory, potentially comprising such dimensions as sound, vocality, vision, and bodily movement, it starts to shade imperceptibly into what might otherwise be seen as the separate art forms of, for instance, music or dance. The boundaries seem to be dissolving. I do not think there is any neat riposte to such issues and I for one am in the end content to stick (mostly) with the term oral literature – but only in the realisation that, however we decide to catch and retain the material we cherish, the ground beneath it is scarcely firm.

### 3.3 Some ethical issues

Let me also touch on the intricate question of assigning due credit to the creators of oral literature. We can no doubt say with some confidence that the days are now well past when, as in 19th- and earlier 20th-century Africa, publications regularly appeared under the names of European collectors rather than local creators or tellers. Often the collections were presented as the product of some 'Tribe', the implication being that here was collective traditional lore without individual input or creativity.

Thankfully we take greater care nowadays to name and acknowledge the individual creators of oral literary forms. But this can prove more elusive than appears at first sight. With oral literature there is sometimes no one answer as

to who gets, or should get, the credit. Our familiar notion of copyright and intellectual property rights tends to work with relatively clear attributions of ownership. Sometimes indeed this *can* – and should – be extended to oral literary forms. But the question can be complex where, more readily than with written literature (though it can happen there too), authorship is distributed. It is not just the overt ‘lead performer’ whose role may need recognition but also, perhaps, some original composer, earlier narrators from whom the present exponent had learnt, co-performers, the co-constructing audience, or yet others again. A given Fijian dance-song might need permission from a local chief (thus in one sense its owner) before it could be performed or recorded, while the composer of a classical Somali oral poem had to be named on each occasion it was recited. Any or all of these varied parties may – arguably – need acknowledging, differently ordered as they are in different genres and diverse cultures. And to complicate things further, there is also the input – not to be ignored – of those who collect, transcribe, translate or edit the material: in the case of oral literature often a very real part of the product that is finally archived or published.

This leads to a further point. Like many colleagues, I used to be dismissive of what I thought of as somehow fabricated forms – of texts produced to order by paid assistants, of scattered stories artificially cobbled together by editors, of ‘invented’ tradition, or of examples like the Congo epics or Fijian myth that I mentioned earlier. These seemed inauthentic, even sometimes describable as ‘fakelore’, and thus irrelevant to our field of study. That is still a possible position. But I would now take a different line. These too are examples of cultural production and, especially if they in turn lead to further distribution and recognition, of potential interest to researchers. After all, it is not just from some accredited ‘elders’ that we find the creation of oral literature or its dynamic interaction with written forms. By now we are sceptical about the idea of fixed, ‘pure’ or ‘uncontaminated’ tradition untouched by human interaction and active processing, and have to accept that those who perform, record, inscribe, edit and translate at any given period also have a part in the process by which some product attains wider distribution or preservation. The important thing is no doubt to be open about how particular cases were recorded and uttered, and what parties were involved in their processing, and not to peddle them as something which they are not.

There are also moral and political questions around *how* oral literary items are collected and from whom. At one point this may not have seemed an issue. When oral forms were seen as just somehow ‘there’, waiting to be picked up as part of tribal wisdom, selection was not really a problem: the ‘tradition’ was collective and everyone equally capable of delivering it to the outside collector. By now we are hopefully more sensitive both to differing creativities and divergent local viewpoints. The impetus may still be to rush to gather as much as possible of the apparently vanishing material as and

whenever we can – not an unworthy motive. But all collectors, local as well as incoming, inevitably find themselves making selections and taking sides, even if unaware of it. There is the question of which genres to focus on and who to get examples from. Should it be the ‘old’ (often prioritised in salvage-type ventures), the educated, the technologically sophisticated, the celebrated practitioners or the more ‘ordinary’ speakers? Or maybe drawn from hidden or marginalised groups, thus perhaps risking offence to more powerful members of the community? There are no unloaded choices. And because verbal expression is a deeply prized human activity the selections will almost certainly be evaluated differently by different parties and are unlikely to be, or perceived to be, disinterested.

And that brings in the questions of what the collectors and the academic practitioners get out of it – whether local or metropolitan, they too have interests – and of how the material, once collected and preserved, is used. Epics collected from ‘the folk’ were exploited as crucial nation-building tools in 19th- and 20th-century nationalist movements (the Finnish *Kalevala* for example); forms associated with powerful sections have been wielded to further their interests; and the oral literary forms attributed to submerged or discriminated groups seized on to reveal and celebrate, perhaps to create, a separate identity. Oral literary texts have been turned to use in schools, in the revival of languages, in arguing for the position of particular groups, in religious mission. None of this is wrong – this after all is the way humans behave. But we have to be aware that oral literature and its processing are not just cold facts of nature above the battles of human life, but part of the social arena. Whether for good or ill, poetry is powerful, and we should not forget it.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Substantial issues then surround the study of oral literature, ones we must take seriously. There are questions around the terms we use, with their hidden implications and limitations; over what it is that is being documented and preserved; over how we elicit oral literary material and give due credit to its multiple creators. Behind all this too are the multitude of participants, creators as well as collectors, with their genuinely divergent views and interests.

But these, let me emphasise, are the kinds of issues that arise in the study of any intrinsically valuable – and sensitive – human product. If there are no simple right answers this is part of the unending and wonderful complexity of our elusive subject. I see the complications around oral literature not as obstacles to its study but as indicators of its rich complexity and deep human significance.

And that brings me back to the rewards. It helps us all that ‘oral literature’ is now *both* a recognised and inspiring concept *and* at the same time one that deserves to be treated with care. Oral literary forms are still being created, and for all the successes so far there remains much to be done, the more so that its scintillating examples are often – though certainly not only – to be found in parts of world seen as remote from western centres of scholarship. Even now they are still sometimes clouded by that typographic prejudice that would rank the oral below the written. All the more reason then to accord the most cordial of welcomes to the World Oral Literature Project for its leadership, and for its recognition of the challenges and the value of the subject it is so rightly promoting.

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