

WRITTEN TRADITION, ORAL TRADITION, ORAL LITERATURE, *FIURITURE*¹

FLORA DEVATINE

(Translated by Kareva Mateata-Allain²)

Pape'ete, Tahiti <tahitile@mail.pf>

Abstract

Traditionally, Orality characterises a human society that does not write and that has no recourse for transmitting cultural traditions, or inscribing the reflections, thoughts, and emotions of its members. Further, each of the members of such a society is responsible for perpetuating Orality and its memory. From this point of view, Orality is the restitution of memory transmitted through diverse expressions of voice or words of a culture. Similar to reproduction by language, sounds and images are transported through a particular level of creation and expression. This happens especially with oratory arts, in which Orality, with its other contexts, also touches upon the liberation of memory and the re-creation of culture.

Keywords

Orality, Oral Literature, *nana'oture* and *nene'iture*³, oral writing, *fiuriture* and French Polynesian Literature

What is Polynesian Orality?⁴

What is it made of? Where does it come from? How is it expressed? What does it talk about? In French Polynesia like everywhere else, Orality includes the transmission of accounts about beliefs and traditions. In French Polynesian orality, terms such as *parau pa'ari*,⁵ *'ā'ai*, *'a'amu*,⁶ *pehe*,⁷ and *'orero*⁸ imply tales, legends, spoken words, and mythic accounts of oral literature. The *'orero* takes place for an arrival, a greeting, a welcome, an inauguration, a meeting, to recognise exchanges, for receptions, for dedication ceremonies, for baptisms, to give grace, to reason, to pray and for tradition.

The *'orero* is an oral text for openings, to pay homage, and for closures. For some, they are engrained into all facets of life: social, civil, public, political, religious, and familial. Some oral texts are recorded, published, and archived. Other texts reside in the live memories of those members of society who record them. The terms *papa*,⁹ *pou*,¹⁰ *faura'o*,¹¹ and *'avej'a*¹² also refer to Orality and they connote how Orality is also the foundation, the support, the construction and the boat that guides the navigation of one's thoughts.

Devantime – Written Tradition and Orality

Orality also includes texts that sometimes require a redefinition of terms (such as *pehe* and 'orero) to identify different forms and contexts depending on how contemporary French Polynesians approach meaning based on a history of discursive terminology that may be just as French as it is Polynesian. It is essential to also take into account other types of contexts since a Polynesian speaking French may either extend or restrain the scope of how he or she applies these forms and concepts based on individual circumstances.

Orality is relative to individual mannerisms, reactions, attitudes, ways of being, walking, talking, thinking, eating, sleeping, dressing or living. It also relates to working or doing nothing, fishing, cultivating, preparing food or sharpening tools. It is expressed when dying of hunger, sickness, or melancholy as well as through living in hope and faith just as much as living in boredom and ignorance. Orality also encompasses gestures and actions punctuated by *pehe*, that are rhythmic poems and droned chants about the tender intimacies of life, the emotions of the soul and spirit, or of a heart in pain, in joy or in mourning. Orality gives us words from time immemorial as well as contemporary times.

Orality entails colorful expressions that eternally resound from all times and places, often reinvented through multiple versions; whether accounts are reviewed, revised, recreated and re-adapted to the circumstances and trends of the moment. Orality is what we offer to sight, sound, and touch. It is perceived by the soul and manifested through what is sketched, painted, penciled, sculpted, and tattooed. Orality is expressed with the enthusiasm of rejoicing the *Heiva*¹³ as much as in the war cries of the names of heroes and their attributes. Orality is also in familial and mythic accounts of the land.

So there you have it. Orality stems from roots and the elaboration of thought; it stems from an alive, dynamic, vibrant, singing, dancing, narrating, nurturing, fishing, cultivating, artistic and rhetorical human society. Orality is obvious in all that is danced, sung, performed, composed, rhymed, drummed and beaten. Orality is rowed, surfed, and raced. It walks over fire, inaugurates the *marae* and launches javelins.¹⁴ Orality is verbalised, screamed, and written. It is evidenced in commentaries, sermons, and exhortations. It is in all that is murmured, stammered and muted.

Orality also has its opposite, which is silence, confinement, and muting in which accounts of oral literature and traditions have been forgotten or are only partially transmitted. But traces preserved in some memories reappear at some moment, transformed, re-actualised, then re-injected into Orality. This permits creativity to assimilate all that lives within its boundaries and all that lands on its shores while planting and engraving new footprints and new landmarks for today's generation to leave for the generations that will follow.

Orality is usually represented as 'frozen', when in fact it is not 'frozen' at all. Certainly, it establishes itself on tradition, but it seeks and absorbs newness. It promotes creativity and adapts to modernity. This is evidenced during the *Heiva* with traditional singing, dancing, percussion, orchestral, 'orero and handicraft competitions that insist on an ancestral, traditional basic foundation. But judges and audiences expect competitors to be innovative through merging the traditional with creativity, originality and modernity. Competing dance groups have the choice to sign up in two different categories; either as amateurs who remain close to tradition or in the category of professional creation.

Devantine – Written Tradition and Orality

Also with instrumentation and percussion contests, musicians may opt to compete in traditional drumming with its imposed rules, or opt to compete in free composition. With the competition for the best dancers, competitors are judged on executing traditional steps combined with their own personal creativity inspired from modernity or their evolution as a dancer. The ultimate goal is a knowledgeable mixture of genres while maintaining a respectable balance with tradition. A society's traditional practices must remain at the core of its expression. Although, ultimately and through execution, this is precisely the part of modernity, despite vivid protests from some traditionalists, that others will replicate and revive. This is how it is in the arts in our current day. Creators and conceptualisers dread the speed and dexterity with which others scramble to copy their new ideas [derived from innovative creativity that melds the traditional with the modern in new and refreshing ways]. Blending old and new is not limited to traditional cultures. An attraction to new concepts is even found in horticulture with research of new species they call 'varieties'. It is also present before planting young fruit trees such as papaya, when planters verify the presence of two pivoting roots that are a sign of mass productivity.

As such, Orality is straddled over two roots between tradition and modernity until it becomes hybridised to differing degrees based on a population's vision. They gather, welcome, adopt, ingest, adapt, or tolerate all that washes up onto its shores. Orality feeds the spirit of innovation through inspiring language, gestures, and customs. It also presents an advantage because it intertwines ways of thinking with ways of doing through an intricate blending of mentalities from different cultures. It accomplishes this new hybridity with a superimposition of epistemological frameworks.

And in doing so, draws in creativity and fecundity. It remains that Orality is not marginalised from evolution, but that rather it is the force, the energy, and the dynamism of the daily lives of people within a traditional society. Orality, due to the divide between production and reproduction of speech, sounds, and images, is a pathway to external sources for renewal and enrichment. In addition, Orality is also a means to find voices confronted with intrusion, diversity, difference and strangeness. And this is where the fragility of Orality resides.

Orality, by dint of its sheer sensitivity and availability, is exposed to cultural and human boundaries and is on the cusp of evolution and modern ways; and, by the same token, confronts its own obstacles and broken threads. With misinformation, under-preparedness and delivered unto itself to face assault by external novelties; Orality is not protected from inaccuracies, nor organisations that are discontent, maladroit, or even in bad taste. Orality entails the transmission of idiom in relationship to the language and what it recounts, says, thinks, expresses, sings, weeps, recites, and harangues. Orality has boundless domains that it reaches through speech and hearing while initiating change. Each interlocutor must connect to his or her sensibilities while entering into a resonating, accepting and conciliatory relationship with Orality.

This means, in the first place, that to speak a language not only gives access to the imagination but opens each individual to the gift of language, to one's own humanity. Cases of extreme isolation aside, once one discovers speech through Orality, one can express one's unique way to exist in the world amongst other people. Orality appears to have been muted ever since its historical encounter with western modern societies, starting with the arrival of explorers and scientists, then the Bible, writing, the presence of British and French missionaries and the introduction of Catholicism and

Devatine – Written Tradition and Orality

Protestantism, the founding of modern schools and the establishing of colonies throughout Oceania. For traditional Polynesian societies, all these events initiated the transition into writing. Orality became limited to the transcription of myths that gave the impression that it had reached a dead end.

However, major historical milestones have shifted the evolution of Orality. For instance, just over forty years ago, progress in secondary education resulted in the first class of high school graduates in French Polynesia. Then the inauguration of the Tahiti-Fa'a'a international airport in the 1960s opened traditional French Polynesian society up to a plethora of modern worlds. In the 1980s, the recognition and incorporation of native languages and cultures into the school curriculum prompted new ways of seeing and thinking about the world. These noted changes allow Orality to keep progressing in different directions, and in turn will give opportunities to quench one's thirst for knowledge from a variety of sources. These changes open avenues to forge new tools, to think about, imagine, express, recreate and redefine oneself in other ways. As a result, we are equipped to participate in the continuum of today's society with the progression of new ideas.

In its totality, Orality provides the roots and platform for French Polynesian literature to take off and fly. Orality is the foundation for French Polynesian literature and in this concert between ancient and modern voices, Orality filters through to enter the records where it deposits the actual imprints of its own path.

Endnotes

¹ The original French title of Flora Devatine's essay is 'L'Oralité: Tradition écrite, Tradition orale, Littérature orale, Fiuriture!' *Fiuriture* is a term originated by Devatine derived from *fioriture* (the French term for embellishment) and *fiu*, a popular Tahitian localism for fed up or bored, with its suffix also suggesting that of *littérature* (literature). Excerpts of the French language text translated for this article appear in Dubois, J-M and Frémy, M-N (eds) (2002).

² Sul Ross State University, Alpine (Texas) <karevamateata@aol.com>

³ These terms are ones specifically coined in this article - *nana'o* are marks tattooed on skin, which Devatine uses as an analogy to writing, and *nene'i* refers to printing on paper. The suffix *-ture* affixed to them associates them with *écri-ture* (writing) and *littéra-ture* (literature).

⁴ French Polynesians refer to themselves as 'Polynesian', but this is within their own local, social and cultural contexts and does not typically refer to Polynesians elsewhere in Oceania, such as New Zealand, Samoa or Hawai'i.

⁵ *Parau pa'ari*: legend and all that belongs to the oral tradition.

⁶ *'Ā'ai*, *'Ā'amu*: a legend, fairytale, story, fable.

⁷ *Pehe*: a traditional song or light-hearted simple song.

⁸ *'Orero*: eloquent speech or discourse; also speaker, orator.

⁹ *Papa*: a family's foundation, a bench, or stone basin.

¹⁰ *Pou*: a pillar, sturdy post or pole.

¹¹ *Faura’o*: various ways to travel (by sea, air, and land).

¹² *Avei’a*: guide, compass, radar.

¹³ *Heiva* is a month long celebration that takes place each July to celebrate all aspects of *Ma’ohi* folkloric, artistic, traditional, athletic and dynamic arts and culture

¹⁴ A stone platform used as a sacred place of ancient worship and now often referred to as a space for social and political ceremonies.

Bibliography

Dubois, J-M and Frémy, M-N (eds) (2002) *101 Mots pour Comprendre la Polynésie Française* ('101 words to understand French Polynesia'), Noumea: GRHOC Université française de Noumea/ Iles de lumière editions