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How to cite:

Finnegan, Ruth (2020). «Transitional» Texts Across the World – What Are They? *Rilce: Revista de Filología Hispánica*, 36(4) pp. 1251–1272.

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Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.15581/008.36.4.1251-72>

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'Transitional' Texts Across the World – What Are They?

Textos transicionales a lo largo y ancho del mundo: ¿qué son?

RUTH FINNEGAN

Open University
Walton Hall, Kents Hill
Milton Keynes MK7 6AA, United Kingdom
r.h.finnegan@open.ac.uk
Orcid ID 0000-0002-0084-265

RECIBIDO: 2 DE SEPTIEMBRE DE 2020
ACEPTADO: 24 DE SEPTIEMBRE DE 2020

Abstract: The main argument of this article is that, to some degree, all texts can be called 'transitional': they are, necessarily, set within the ongoing or processes of history, thus multiple in nature, flexible, changing, conditional on specific occasions, shaped by their cultural context(s), their medium and, above all, by specific creators and receivers. Similarly, I argue that there does not exist anything necessarily revolutionary about the once touted but now widely questioned 'Great Divide' between orality and literacy across which texts had to make a great transition. I also discuss the various different modes and situations in which texts could be said to be, for different users and purposes, in some way 'transitional', with particular reference to examples from Africa and the South Pacific. I conclude that all culture, all language, all human action is in a sense transitional and dynamic.

Keywords: Orality. Literacy. Pragmatic Approach. Sociolinguistics. Cultural Anthropology.

Resumen: Este artículo sostiene que todos los textos, en alguna medida, pueden ser llamados "transicionales": necesariamente están insertos en la marcha o proceso de la historia, y por tanto son múltiples por naturaleza, flexibles, cambiantes, condicionados por ocasiones específicas, modelados por su(s) contexto(s) cultural(es), su medio y, sobre todo, por los productores y receptores individuales. Igualmente, explico que no existe nada necesariamente revolucionario acerca de la "gran división", tiempo atrás publicitada pero ahora ampliamente cuestionada, entre oralidad y escritura, a través de la cual los textos tenían que hacer una gran transición. También discuto los diferentes modos y situaciones en los que se puede decir que los textos son, para distintos usuarios y fines, "transicionales" de alguna manera, con particular referencia a ejemplos de África y del Pacífico sur. Concluyo que toda la cultura, todo el lenguaje, toda la actividad humana es, en cierto sentido, transicional y dinámica.

Palabras clave: Oralidad. Escritura. Enfoque pragmático. Sociolingüística. Antropología cultural.

INTRODUCTION

So here is a volume about transitional texts, and one with fine topics and contributors too, obviously a great and fertile subject. But are there any such things in reality? And if so, in what sense(s)? Well yes, my own answer is that of course there are: they are *everywhere*. But also, in another way, one in which the term has often been used, there are not, not at least in the sense intended.

Let me explain.

Everywhere – yes, we are surrounded by transitional texts. Think of these ways in which linguistic texts can make a transition in some sense from one form of existence to another.

- From one language to another: translation.
- From speech to writing: transcription.
- From hard copy to digital: input.
- From digital to (among other things) speech and writing: download.

There are of course others, such as between poetry and prose or the mutual interchanges between longer and shorter versions or differing performances of the 'same' linguistic products, but the above, I would say, are the main examples of transitions (transformations might be an equally appropriate term) between different media of human expression. As such they are widespread, in fact commonplace, and strike us as nothing odd or revolutionary.

They can overlap and be mingled, too, in many ways, some exemplified above, by containing a mix of several different dimensions in terms of their mode of composition/genesis/origin, realisation/performance, and dissemination/transmission. Texts are inevitably composite – I might say transitional or transiting – human creations.

There are then many ways in which texts are and can be articulated in more than one medium. This should be no surprise given the multiplex nature of human language use, its many settings, purposes and qualities. In this context *all* texts could be said to be 'transitional' and of mixed origin and quality: multiple in nature, flexible, changing, conditional on specific occasions, shaped by specific creators and receivers, by their cultural context, their medium. All culture, all history, all human action is in a sense transitional, dynamic, in process.

And, after all, language use is in itself transitional in its effect and nature, in that it moves through time. Unlike visual and material forms of expression

(static, all of a piece), language, whether spoken, written or digitised, exists in a sequence. It does not stay – or, more precisely its *users* do not stay – in one place. It is dynamic, processual. Yes, it transits.¹

Some texts however are seen to be *extra* transitional, in a sense iconically so: through their nature, their social and cultural setting, and/or the preconceptions of some (maybe not all) of their participants, of some observers in various roles, and from certain scholarly perspectives.

I purposely did not, as might be more usual, begin with that type of transitional text which is seen as moving from what can be represented as 'oral' and 'traditional' to what is 'modern' and 'written' and somehow partaking in something of both: both a contrast and a continuum. I wanted, before tackling that particular form and the controversies surrounding it, to set it in the broader perspective of the *many* forms that can be regarded as in some sense or other transitional.

Let me now however turn to that well-known material before moving on to some specific and hopefully illuminating cases from Africa and the South Pacific islands.

TRANSITIONAL TEXTS, ORAL FORMULAIC STYLE, AND THE 'GREAT DIVIDE'

As is now widely known, the appearance in 1960 of Albert Lord's revolutionary *The Singer of Tales* with its recordings and analyses of the remarkable (largely but not exclusively) non-literate South Slavic epic poets led to an explosion of interest in the linguistic style, the cultural transition from oral to literate, traditional to modern, and the compositional techniques of singers who, not relying on written sources, had the facility, assisted by the repetition of well-worn formulae at every level, to sing thousands of fluent lines without pause for reflection and vary them to suit the audience and occasion, never the same twice. Further, it was reported, once a poet had decisively stepped out of orality and into literacy, he lost these oral powers. Although Lord (while still seeing these as radically different ways of composing) later softened his stance, he could not conceive of a singer thinking at one and the same time

1. I should make clear, as will indeed be obvious to most readers, that both here and in my other writing I take a pragmatist approach to language (as in e.g. Barron et al.), that is, I see language as *action*, and collocations of words in any medium, not as objects or texts with, somehow, their own objective existence, but as created, used and interpreted by specific human agents in specific settings.

in terms of both fluidity and fixity, orality and literacy. He might go from one mode to the other but could not be in both these opposed worlds at the same time.

The influence of Lord's book was profound. Studies of transitional texts multiplied, tracing for example the transition between a purely 'traditional' and a 'literary' folktale, or the engagement with tradition in Greek lyric poets or Grimm's tales. The apparent oral basis of long accepted written texts from Homer, Old English literature, Indian epic and more was detected from their formulaic style (see, for example, references in Stoltz and Shannon). This approach for a time swept the board, supported by innumerable publications and student dissertations.

In this approach, moreover, Lord and his followers were supported by then widely accepted notions of humankind: that it is divided into two opposed kinds: the primitive against the civilised; rural, traditional and unchanging as opposed to modern, urban and progressive; oral against literate. The somewhat romantically envisaged nostalgic 'other' was widely felt to reside in the world defined by 'the oral' and 'the traditional' – states implied to be simple and unchanging, static and unaffected by conscious human agency or changes through time.

This was the Great Divide that was, for a time, widely believed to mark both human history and the present constitution of the world, *the* key divider being literacy, above all the alphabetic literacy of the expansive west. Small wonder that a step out of that passive gloom looked like a radical one and the South Slavic epic 'formulaic' stylistic appeared to provide a benchmark for orality. Given the key connection, in this binary model of humanity, of orality with the 'traditional', the 'oral' was taken as the mark of the age old passive unthinking 'Other' (as if a transcript from a hip-hop performance or radio talk were inevitably old and 'traditional', essentially belonging to a bygone era, because it originated in an audio/oral medium!).

It all seemed to fit together, and inevitably written texts, especially those marked by a 'formulaic' style – well, formulaic in certain ways, for all accepted genres have their repeated conventions and verbal patterning, some markedly so – could be seen as traditional. Such texts were in writing, admittedly, but they still carried detectable survivals from their oral past: in other words they were transitional.

The concept of human history as having reached a great turning point with the emergence of writing, leaving those without it radically behind, in

fact goes back many centuries. The 1960s onwards, however, saw it acquiring a new sharpness. Scholars wrote strongly and persuasively on these lines, starting with Lord himself and his prolific followers, but also including, among many others, Marshall McLuhan in 1962 (directly influenced by Lord), Walter Ong (1982), and Jack Goody (1977, 1987).

As Ong put it (note the extreme terms):

basic differences [...] between the ways of managing knowledge and verbalization in primary oral cultures (cultures with no knowledge at all of writing) and in cultures deeply affected by the use of writing [...] The shift from orality to literacy and on to electronic processing engages social, economic, political, religious and other structures. (Ong 1, 3)

But the stark 'oral/literate' opposition started to look incomplete as a compass of human modes of existence. It became increasingly clear that human communication processes are not exhaustively accounted for by considering the purportedly opposite poles of oral and written. The colonial period of Aztec Mexico, for instance, saw not a binary but a *triadic* relationship between oral communication, Latin alphabet and local pictographic writing, while in parts of Africa the communicative modes of drums, dance, song, displays of clothing or of three-dimensional wooden or metal images contended, complemented and mingled with spoken word or written scripts. Modes of communication emerge as hugely more multi-sided than can be conveyed by the binary model, for humans draw variously and disparately on a multiplex spectrum of sounded words, graphic representations, music, gestures, images, and more.

An explicit awareness of this wider range of modes gradually replaced the more simplified binary view of human culture. Doubts mounted about the simple oral/literate opposition. Brian Street (1984; 1995; 2010), Harvey Graff, myself (Finnegan 1970; 2007) and others raised fundamental queries, and meticulous ethnographers who, like our contributors here, turned to the study of the detailed actions and expressions of people in situations of cultural change rather than broader brush generalities, identified immensely greater complexity than would be suggested by the binary theories.

Some still see the world of 'orality' as the counterpart to, and polar opposite of 'literacy', in an account that gives a full picture of human culture and history. But it would seem that in broad terms they no longer enjoy widespread support in most scholarly circles.

It is in this sense then, that I would claim that there is no such thing as transitional texts, if by this we envisaged linguistic products that encapsulate a radical transition from the world of the traditional oral other to a totally different world of Literacy.

This, then, is the background to the term 'transitional text'. It was coined by Albert Lord and used to describe texts that appeared to represent a transition from a fully oral mode of creation to the written one, marking in this way both a continuum and a contrast between oral and written literature. The term is still with us but approaches to it have moved on. Until recently, as Sarali Gintsburg points out, transitional texts had mostly been viewed as a means to point to the oral origins of certain literary works. Now, however, as finely demonstrated in this issue, they are being viewed and analysed in more complex and sophisticated and, above all, contextualised ways. Studies now include the entire process of transcription, edition, and publication of orally delivered creations from any era: the concept of transitional texts is now treated less as an end in itself than as a tool to point to a range of contextualised topics in a changing world.

WHAT OF AFRICA: HOME OF TRANSITIONAL TEXTS?

Africa would seem the obvious place to find transitional texts. Twentieth-century de-colonization gave newly independent nations a special interest in recording and in dignifying their local, often unwritten, forms. New vantage points emerged as spoken utterances were increasingly captured through audio and, later, video and film recordings.

Are we witnessing a radical transition, therefore, across the great binary divides of human history, from Orality to Literacy? It might seem so at first sight and this indeed is one common conception of Africa.

But this view is wrong. Surprising as this might seem, Africa has, like Europe, long been a continent of writing (Finnegan 2018), albeit little noticed by western visitors since for centuries it existed predominantly in Arabic rather than Roman script. This was followed by long contact with western literacy through the influence of traders, missionaries and educators. True, writing was not for everyone and was generally utilised and disseminated on limited lines and for limited purposes – not unlike the scenario found earlier in Europe – but there was writing all the same. The great and difficult traditional-to-modern transition envisaged by outsiders is not something African writers themselves seem to widely attest, nor did individuals feel 'torn

between two cultures' as westerners sometimes like to see it. They just get on with it, drawing creatively on the resources at their disposal – as do we all.

Among these resources is the fine tradition of praise poetry, richly used in African cultures and evident in many settings – public and private ceremonies, rites of passage, self praises/identity quests for individuals, praises of leaders, animals and natural objects – which is a vehicle for the beauties of poetic expression and performance.

The manifold social significance of praise poetry is clear. It can stress accepted values, celebrate Hausa rulers in terms of descent and birth, Zulu warriors for military exploits, or be used by Nupe praisers to laud a ruler's new car. In the past, military exploits were often the focus, but other events also inspire them – exploits in hunting, or the experience of going to work in European areas, which was at one point a new type of adventure to be celebrated among the Tswana. Praises both now and in the past can also be a medium of public opinion, for praisers could withhold praise or include implicit or explicit derogatory allusions as a negative sanction on the leader's acts.

Praise poetry is still popular. Young Zulu men from country areas who take up manual work in towns nowadays have the habit of interspersing long strings of their own self-praises between the verses of their guitar songs. They are particularly apt on a courting expedition, great for impressing the ladies. Local newspapers abound with written versions both as an everyday offering and on special occasions like the installation of a new paramount chief or the arrival of some famous visitor.

In northern Sierra Leone and other parts of West Africa expert, Mandingo singers, usually with drummers or xylophonists, wander through the streets (I have been accosted in my turn – a potentially costly business for the praisee) or attend festivals on their own initiative. They pick on some outstanding or reputedly wealthy individual for their praises; and even those who refer to these performers contemptuously as 'beggars' are in practice glad to 'reward' them with gifts and thanks, thus avoiding the possibility of public shaming for their lack of generosity. They are very much a part of modern life – an elite politician or professor's party would be lacking without a hired praise poet, and at many international conferences (I have several times experienced this myself) an established performer is engaged to deliver resounding praises for each participant.

Some of the subjects treated in these modern praise poems are analogous to the traditional ones – new types of adventures, distinguished visitors, wed-

ding feasts, self-praises in modern terms – and such topics can be treated with the same kind of solemnity and imagery as the traditional ones, notably the remarkable plethora of praise poems for Nelson Mandela. Other recent poems draw on traditional style and imagery to praise (for example) racehorses, a political party, football team or successful leader.

Thus, when the NPN leader Shagari became the first civilian President of Nigeria in 1981, defeating the UPN Awolowo, his victory was celebrated in electrifyingly performed and (now) written words. In English translation they run:

Awolowo did dare to touch Shagari
 A duel is in the making
 A duel is in the making surely...
 NPN, UPN
 A duel is in the making
 A duel is in the making surely. (Ogede 54)

Others focus on objects like a train, a favourite chair or a bicycle.

My frail little bicycle,
 The one with the scar, my sister Seabelo,
 Horse of the Europeans, feet of tyre,
 Iron horse, swayer from side to side. (Van der Merwe 336)

The same style is evident in modern written forms. Here is another praise poem about a train, this time written:

I am the black centipede, the rusher with a black nose
 Drinker of water even in the fountains of the witches,
 And who do you say will bewitch me?
 I triumphed over the one who eats a person [the sun] and over the pitch
 black darkness
 When the carnivorous animals drink blood day and night.
 I am the centipede, the mighty roarer that roars within. (Van Zyl 131)

The style is thus now popular (just as the traditional western sonnet, novel, and drama as well as local folk forms have been for European writers) as a genre for written as well as performed poetry, and such well-known writers as Nyembezi, Mangoela, Vilakazi, and Dhlomo have studied and admired traditional praises, turning to them for inspiration for their own writing. There

is a long tradition of publishing praise poems in local newspapers, and the texts continue to move back and forwards between written and unwritten formats, and, nowadays, computers. It is a flourishing and popular genre.

In other genres too, as throughout the world, there is both change and continuity, with the new building on and out of the old. In both popular and high culture there are emergent forms using a mix of languages or media, such as the hymns of the Zulu Nazarite church, hip hop in Sierra Leone, South African radio drama, or the striking Sokoto genre that uses standard Islamic vocabulary with a delivery style reminiscent of both traditional praise poetry and Indian film song – mixed indeed. Story tellers use themes from varied origins, coming, as for us too, through many links both oral and written such as the Arabian Nights, Aesop's Tales or the Bible (one of my most vivid fieldwork memories is of the vivid rendition of tales in a remote Sierra Leone village not only of the trickster spider but, memorably, of Adam and Eve – Adami i Ifa). We live in a world, transiting indeed, of global interaction.

LINGUISTIC ACTION IN THE PACIFIC ISLANDS PAST AND PRESENT

Here is another setting in which oral and written forms, far from being mutually contradictory or needing some careful 'transition' between them, regularly interact, overlap, and support each other in ways shaped, as everywhere, by human and social influencing rather than by the medium in itself. This comes out particularly clearly in the way that the writing down and codification of 'myths' or 'legends' was not a neutral or merely 'technological' procedure but a social process shaped by political, ideological and religious pressures.

The earlier collectors and analysts of literature in the Pacific deliberately set out to find 'old' forms. Their aim, understandable at the time, was to find and record what was thought to be the truly native 'old tradition'. Again understandably, they were influenced by the interests of the period, particularly, that is, by the romantic back-to-nature model so influential in the nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries, indeed to some extent still.

The South Pacific islands lent themselves easily to this picture. There was to be found, it seemed, the quintessential and eternal 'noble savage' in free and 'natural' state uncontaminated by the influence of modern civilization: there from far ages and over long generations, handed down from the distant ancestral past. This model led collectors to search for *the* forms supposedly characteristic of that 'primitive and unspoiled original state'. They

were ready to reject as 'distortions' elements which seemed to show anything, however slight, of the influence of western traders, officials, or missionaries.

This approach resulted in a misleading picture of the actual facts. Above all it failed to take account of the way literature and communication in the South Pacific had inevitably been affected by the ongoing historical processes of many centuries. To believe that songs, chants, stories or proverbs recorded in the nineteenth or twentieth century in the south Pacific area arose in a situation untouched by Christianity, or by foreign contacts, is to disregard the facts. We can never be reminded too often that history – people, politicians, invasions, culture contact and the like – was taking place in the Pacific islands every bit as much as in Europe. It is just that we generally know less about it.

This does not make the literature created and collected during the last century or so any the less interesting. On the contrary it is fascinating to study how once-foreign ideas and stories (from the Christian tradition especially) have been taken over by Pacific islanders and moulded according to local styles and insights into truly Pacific literary genres. It is striking too to see how poets and narrators have not been content just to take over word-for-word verbalization from the past but have also worked with new ideas and developed new forms built on the old. It seems unfortunate that the romantic search for 'the primitive' has so often blinded investigators to *current and developing forms* of Pacific literature and of the complex and creative ways in which new ideas have been moulded into Pacific traditions.

It may seem odd but, in this process, *writing* has played, and still plays, a crucial part. It is true that when one speaks of 'oral literature' the obvious model is of literary forms composed, transmitted and performed *without* writing, and this indeed is true of some cases. But there are also instances where literature is oral in only *some* of these senses. For example, a piece was sometimes *composed* in writing, but then transmitted and performed orally; or composed and performed orally but with writing then used in *its transmission*. These, and other, combinations can be observed extensively in the Pacific both today and in the evidence concerning the past.

The complexity comes out clearly if we consider some specific examples. Maori literature provides many instances of forms first (it seems) composed in an oral context but then written down for their circulation and transmission. In New Zealand, people like to learn Maori songs, but if they find memorizing hard, they begin with a *written* text. Indeed, some learners take their song texts along with them when they go to meetings, and locally printed hymn

books have long been a feature of church services. Maori orators often carry notebooks around with them, filled with random jottings on fine turns of phrase for future use. In New Zealand it was, and is, usual for Maori families to keep manuscript books in which are recorded genealogies, the texts of songs known to members of the family, and local traditions. For the Maori at any period there was no intrinsic incongruity about using songs (basically an 'oral' mode) in written communications. In the nineteenth century, for example, we are told that Maoris writing a letter almost invariably began it with a few words from a song. Maori newspapers printed hundreds of texts sent in by correspondents in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and there are many collections of poems and other texts, running into thousands of lines. Literary forms of this kind circulate in clubs, special performances and schools, and this normally implies some reliance on written texts as the vehicle through which these are learned.

Writing is not the only mode, of course. Face-to-face performance is still important and Maori poetry is performed in both radio broadcasts and gramophone records, as well. It is also preserved in recorded form through the New Zealand Broadcasting Corporation and in similar recordings and transcriptions organized through universities. These may then circulate yet again in the pages of the Maori magazine *Te Ao Hou* and similar periodicals.

In the Caroline Islands, people similarly treasured notebooks with song texts which they were sometimes prepared to show to collectors or, alternatively pass on by oral dictation. Similarly, in the great collection of Tongan poetry, it is clear that several poems had appeared in written as well as oral form and the same applies to several of the sources for Gifford's classic edition of Tongan 'myths and tales'. As he writes:

the printing press has undoubtedly done more to preserve the extant Tongan myths and legends than has oral transmission. Fortunately both the Wesleyan Methodist and the Roman Catholic churches in Tonga adopted the broad policy of publishing in their Tongan language magazines many stories from raconteurs now long dead. Several tales presented in the following pages are drawn from these sources. (Gifford 5)

Many forms of literature involve biblical themes. To take just a few instances: modern Samoan oratory is shot through with biblical references; the popular Fijian *same* (hymns/psalms) are specially composed poems on biblical topics and Christian hymns in local languages are common throughout the area, including

those associated with separatist religious cults. Similarly, most mid-twentieth songs in Uvea and Futuna were Christian and one of the most popular poetic genres in the Cook Islands, 'Christmas songs', were specially composed on biblical themes. At the 1976 Tuvalu celebrations during discussions of the independence constitution, by far the largest proportion of dances involved songs on topics drawn from the Bible, like Moses and the tablets, the Israelites leaving Egypt, Daniel and the lions, and the wise men following the star. Everywhere the Bible is a common resource for oral, broadcast and written media.

Assumptions about some acquaintance with written sources or the techniques of writing regularly play a part. Thus, in the song of congratulation composed for the then President of Nauru, Hammer De Roburt, when he was made an OBE, one of the highlights was a play on the letters OBE, Boe being a district in Nauru, with the witty suggestion that he got the OBE because of coming from a district named by the same three letters.

Another way in which written and oral forms interact is where some piece is *originally composed partially or wholly through writing* (sometimes, as we have seen, from oral antecedents) and thence passes into the 'oral tradition' to be transmitted and performed orally. The story-tellers in Rennell and Bellona, for instance, used to write out their stories before telling them to the collectors. Their stories were nevertheless published under the title of 'the oral traditions' of these islands.

Perhaps the best documented example of written composition leading to oral circulation is that of the famous 'Kaunitoni myth' in Fiji – a fascinating and instructive case. This narrative is the story of the first origins of the Fijians and whence they came. Their ancestors, according to the myth, set out in their canoe, the Kaunitoni, from a land far to the west and sailed towards the rising sun, led by the chief Lutunasobasoba. They were driven by a storm onto the coast of Viti Levu, the main island of Fiji. Lutunasobasoba's brother Degei searched out a place for them to live in the high northeast mountains and after a successful settlement there the people moved out all through Fiji.

This stirring and inspiring myth is widely known and told throughout the whole of the Fiji group and has been mentioned by a large number of scholars as established tradition. It seems to be a clear case of 'oral literature', indeed of 'oral tradition' handed down from the far past, a charter for present day arrangements.

The surprise is that this is not so. In fact, far from it. A detailed and fully documented historical account (France) has demonstrated conclusively that

in fact it originated in the late nineteenth century and that its composition rested as much on the written word as on oral forms. For it turns out that this famous 'traditional' myth was in fact unknown in Fiji earlier in the nineteenth century.

The evidence is clear. The nineteenth century authorities with close familiarity with Fijian customs are unanimous that there were *no* tales about the origins of the Fijians, much though they wished to discover them. What had actually happened was that in 1892, a brief reference to a story was published by Basil Thomson, 'an amateur anthropologist and enthusiastic observer of Fijian culture', as France describes him. In this story the ancestors of the Fijians had been washed up – as people might well have been from time to time – on the west coast of Viti Levu, though there was apparently no mention of the name of the group's leader or of their canoe. Thomson, convinced from his readings in anthropology that the Fijians *must* have a 'myth of origin', was eager to find elaboration.

By then, as France explains it, quite a lot of people knew what Thomson was looking for. The mission schools had introduced Fijians to the knowledge of distinct racial groups occupying different areas of the world, and several of the mission teachers had evolved definite views on the origins of the Fijian race. A graduate of the Navuloa mission school, who studied there in 1892-1894, described history lessons in which he was categorically told of the African origins of his ancestors. So the history being taught as fact by European teachers in at least some of the mission schools took as fact that Fijians ultimately came from Africa. Fijian village names were equated with those in Tanganyika, and Fijian customs compared to those of the ancient city of Thebes.

In 1892 the editor of the Fijian language paper *Na Mata* held a competition to discover a definitive history of the Fijians. It is surely no accident that an account on these lines, almost certainly written by Thomson's clerk, was the entry chosen in good faith by the editor and published in seventeen episodes from September 1892:

So the Kaunitoni legend was born: of missionary parentage, and nurtured by the enquiries of the Native Lands Commission. Its general acceptance at the present time is one of the products of Fiji's transition from a geographical expression to a nation; it has the same socially cohesive qualities as the national coat of arms and the flag. But it is no more closely related to Fijian culture than they; it does not, apparently, antedate them. (France 112-13)

So the famous Kaunitoni story did *not* arise from oral composition, far less go back to 'prehistory' as used to be believed. Nevertheless, it is now a widely known tale, told throughout Fiji and giving a sense of unity to a people otherwise widely scattered over scores of islands and speaking different dialects.

As such, this arguably 'transitional' text is no imposture, but a genuine, humanly created, reality for many thousands of Fijians. The fact that its original composition was largely through the medium of writing, and stimulated by the interest of foreign scholars, is no reason for rejecting its current reality and popular oral circulation among Fijians. No one now is going to regard this 'transitional' text as 'unauthentic'.

This is not an unusual situation; for the influence of writing and the interest of foreigners have often – and not just in the Pacific region – encouraged the collecting and formulation of stories, naturally moulded by the interests and preconceptions of the collectors.

For another example, take Maori myths about creation, the primary gods, the peopling of the world, and the occupation of particular tracts of land by their owners. Many of the traditions about these topics recorded in the classic collections, did not, as once assumed, just find their way spontaneously and in their 'traditional', 'natural' form into these collections. Rather they were sought after by the collectors, their recording and transcription were carefully organized, and they were in many cases written down specifically for the collectors by literate Maoris.

In Grey's *Ngati Toa*, Grey's main source was the young chief Matene Te Whiwhi. He was a Christian who against the wishes of the elder chiefs travelled from Wellington to the Bay of Islands in 1839 to obtain a missionary for his people and in 1843 went on a dangerous voyage around the South Island to take Christianity to yet other groups. He contributed in writing to Grey's collection, and his manuscripts, which are still extant, cover some 78 pages of tradition, genealogy and poems. It was these, and material from other Maori informants, that Grey wove into a single account in his famous collection. It is obvious that writing as well as 'oral tradition' played a part in the formulation of these narratives.

Luomala makes a similar comment about the famous Maori origin stories about the hero Maui. As she explains there never has been one established version of these tales, but rather as many versions as there are (and were) tellers. So it is not surprising that the apparently authoritative version in the collection is in fact just one among many possible ones, composed by a par-

ticular individual (probably in writing), using his own insights and his own way of presenting the episodes. Luomala comments on the unique characteristics of the way in which the composer-teller of the story created his own personal composition:

Its unity, coherence, and depth of feeling point to the work of a literary genius reinterpreting the mythology of his people... Its author-raconteur saw the possibility of using an error in the father's rites over Maui as a point of departure in building up suspense to a climax. The narrator has integrated various stages of Maui's career from birth to death into a composition which resembles a novelette in its closely woven plot. (Luomala 38, 63)

The same applies to many, perhaps most, of the 'myths' and 'legends' recorded in the nineteenth century and published as classic collections of Pacific traditions. It is often forgotten that by fairly early on in the nineteenth century – and certainly by mid-century – there were many literate Pacific islanders, particularly in New Zealand and Hawaii but also increasingly in islands like Tonga, Fiji, Samoa, the majority of them deeply involved in Christianity and mission teaching. It was enthusiasts like these who were responsible for organizing the collection of 'traditional tales' or acting as scribes to write them down in answer to requests from administrators, missionaries, and other enthusiastic collectors from abroad.

It is worth adding that this does not mean that the 'traditions' thus recorded are in some way meretricious or not 'genuine'. It is true they do not represent any pure 'natural' and 'primeval' state. But then there probably never was such a state, for individuals presumably always made their interpretations and presented their own versions, not necessarily disinterested, of accepted plots and motifs. In any case, we have to remember that any recorded and printed version will have been shaped by factors such as the personal views and ambitions of the narrator and/or the composer, the context in which the collecting took place, the personality and known desires of the collector, and, in many cases, some use of writing. Writing has therefore been involved from the very start of systematic collecting – hardly surprising as this kind of thing that has been happening forever across the world, not least in Europe.

Another facet of what might in some sense be regarded as 'transition' is the rich potential of written 'feedback' into oral form and vice versa. Since there were unquestionably literate people around both in earlier centuries and more recently, as well as books of many kinds (not only the Bible but accounts

of the classic voyages and of local traditions), many people had the opportunity to know, directly or indirectly, the contents of these works. One can never in fact assume without question that the accounts in 'oral narratives' came from some kind of 'purely oral' independently existent tradition.

In several cases there is evidence of direct or indirect influence from written works. Perhaps the most obvious case comes in Polynesian creation narratives with their echoes of the biblical creation story:

At the time that turned the heat of the earth,
 At the time when the heavens turned and changed,
 At the time when the light of the sun was subdued
 To cause light to break forth,
 At the time of the night of Makalii (winter)
 Then began the slime which established the earth,
 The source of deepest darkness.
 Of the depth of darkness, of the depth of darkness,
 Of the darkness of the sun, in the depth of night,
 It is night,
 So was night born. (*Kumulipo*, first verse; Liliuokalani 5)

As Henige sums it up:

The co-optative impulse seemed to have been greatest for the Polynesian creation myths. The introduction of the Bible, with its own creation myths – supported, as one might expect, by genealogical scaffolding – presented certain problems for the Polynesians. Their acceptance of Christianity required either the acceptance of its genealogical/aetiological concomitants and the consequent rejection of their own myths, or an attempt to assimilate the two discordant bodies of material. Several attempts at assimilation were in fact made. Some were more obvious than others. These included the introduction of Garden of Eden concepts into Polynesian creation myths, the banishment of evil spirits from a paradise, purgatory, the Flood, and the interpolation of prominent Biblical figures into Polynesian genealogies. (Henige 98)

Let me mention a few further examples. There is, for instance, the 'very generally received Tahitian tradition' reported in 1829. This tells of how the first human pair were created by the god Taaroa. He made man from red earth, but then sent him to sleep. While he slept he took out one of his *ivi*, or bones,

and made with it a woman, whom he gave to the man as his wife, and they became the progenitors of mankind.

At the time of its recording, informants repeatedly insisted that it was a tradition among them from before any foreigner arrived. It looks rather more likely that they were mistaken, and that, though the collectors of the time might have wished otherwise there *was*, in fact, direct biblical influence. Between the time of Tahiti's discovery by Wallis in 1767 and the arrival of the first missionaries from London in 1797, Tahitians had had a good deal of contact with Europeans and several individuals had had opportunities to become acquainted with Christian mythology. And whatever else Europeans did or did not pass on from the Bible, the story of the creation of the first man and woman would probably have been among the most common, and, of course, the most consistent in each telling.

And even twenty or thirty years before the first missionaries arrived in Tahiti, and forty years before collectors were recording native traditions, Christianity and its influence was already spreading fast through the island. By then many Tahitians had no doubt heard the Biblical account of man's creation from other sources too. In Polynesian terms this represents two or three generations, and it is not surprising to find the natives insisting to Ellis that the story of the creation of first man out of red earth, and the first woman from his bone, were sincerely thought by them to be a pre-European tradition.

Again in the 'traditions' written down by the Hawaiian scholars in the mid-nineteenth century there are clear carry-overs from biblical stories in their versions of Hawaiian creation narratives. Like to any other collector (myself no doubt included), the native writers moulded the stories according to their own insights. It is not surprising that they demonstrated the influences they had both received from their mission education.

Their accounts described the creation of the universe and of humans in a way obviously patterned on Genesis, later elaborated in conversations with the leading Hawaiian collectors to include the fall of man and the Flood. The stories were taken seriously by foreign scholars as evidence of the early history of the Polynesians and might now be regarded as typical transitional texts, from oral tradition to written record. Looking back now, however, in the light of more recent analyses of these and similar texts it seems obvious that a major part was in fact played by direct and indirect influences from written literature.

After Christianity became known in Tahiti, accounts of the god Ta'aroa were embellished by various Biblical accretions, for example, his creation of a pair of primeval ancestors. Initially Ta'aroa was the family creator god of the Pomare family, which by the last quarter of the eighteenth century, was beginning to become predominant in the Society Islands. With the ascendancy of the Pomares in Tahiti, Ta'aroa became the recognised creator god for the entire archipelago.

In the half-century after Cook's visit to Tahiti in 1773 the concept of Ta'aroa as creator god spread throughout much of Polynesia... Inter-island communication became much greater with the regular visits of Europeans after Cook's voyages. Tahitians are known to have visited many other islands on European ships... The obvious implication of all this is that this relatively brief period of fifty years was sufficient to permit the widespread absorption of a Tahitian myth into the traditional cosmologies of several other Polynesian islands. This propensity to absorb data from other oral traditions was accentuated by feedback from written European sources. (Henige 98-99)

This is an instructive case for it again demonstrates how older ideas about the 'pure' and isolated state of the 'traditional Pacific societies' are often simply wrong. From at least the eighteenth century onwards there were constant contacts between different islands which, combined with the influence of writing, sometimes had direct and extensive influence on so-called 'oral tradition'.

Against this background it is in no way strange to find overlap between written and unwritten literary forms. As demonstrated in account after account of reading and writing in European history (now too – think of the lyrics of today's popular songs), there is in fact no reason at all why forms should not overlap, they are *not* 'transitional texts' in Lord's sense and there is no contradiction between them.

Nor is there anything at all inappropriate, as it seems to some theorists, in the use of schools as one important context for the transmission of oral literary forms in the Pacific today – stories, riddles, lullabies, dance-songs and others. This happens in Europe too, indeed all over the world for school education plays an important part in the circulation, and in many cases the revival, of literary genres (often dubbed 'folklore') which at one time – and often still – also circulate, maybe predominantly, in an oral, usually sung, medium.

This has notably been so among the Maori. Maori high schools, especially the church boarding schools and the Maori clubs at the various teachers colleges and universities, have been in the forefront of Maori cultural revival, introducing new literary or musical forms and amalgams, ranging from George Webby's 'Story of Wiremu' at Wellington Teacher's College in 1959 to the various Maori operettas devised and performed by Turakina Maori Girls' College and by St Peter's School at Auckland and Ardmore Teachers' College Maori Club during the early sixties.

Cultural clubs and radio play their part too, as does the church, utilising writing as well as oral media. In fact, even if it was desirable for either practical or analytic purposes, there is by now no way in which purely 'oral' literature could be fully separated off from written literature or from that in which writing has some influence.

These transitions and interactions will continue, and now an even greater range of media, the radio, together with gramophones, tape, cassette and other audio devices, and the Internet, plays an important part in the modern Pacific. In radio, the oral/audio medium comes into its own, as stories, poems, songs, and speeches are broadcast over areas much wider than 'traditional' narrators or minstrels could reach with their individual voices. And modern-day students are still spirit-inspired to write and sing the ancient spirit-inspired *meke* song-dance – no more ancient no doubt than the western sonnet genre – to new themes and audiences.

But such changes, such transitions are the way, are they not, of human cultural forms, both written and unwritten, *anywhere, anytime?*

EPILOGUE

Transitional texts remain a useful concept if by this we mean verbal products that are or can be created by human users in a number of different modes and media including spoken, sung, declaimed, written in calligraphic script, in hieroglyphics, in Chinese pictographs, alphabetically, printed, digitized – or, indeed, held in the mind and in the memory. These are all around us. Think of the gospels and all the different modes through which we know them, pictorial as well as written (Kelber 1997); of the Koran, essentially sonic but also existent on paper and computer screen; of the sacred books and poetry and literature of the world (sung, spoken, captured in visual image, written, printed, memorised, computer-stored); of Greek and Latin literature first

published in spoken performance then coming down to us as written and (once again) read aloud. Or think of epic lines and song lyrics in their many existences and transformations, from Homer to slam (Foley 2002; 2012) or Beatles songs composed and circulated in performance but now also findable in print anthologies; of proverbs; or of the remarkable 'drum language' of Africa, yet another *linguistic* form (Finnegan 2018). Recall the medieval verbal products going in and out of oral (spoken and sung) and scribal tradition (Amodio 2004).

Or indeed another example. This very article came first from my thinking, my observations (I am an anthropologist after all) and from my reading, then articulated in notes, in conversations, written and oral presentations, then formulated further in printed articles. For this, as with any creator (African, Pacific, European) I drew on the linguistic resources I inherited – the verbal patterns, genres, idioms around me (call them 'formulae' if you prefer) for published work, and turned them to my own purposes. Parts of this one I first spoke and then transcribed and fed in – so, oral into written. Does it really look any different from any other of my writing or other writing? 'Transitional' texts, whatever the background that they have been changed from or drawn on do not really have any single identifiable stylistic features in themselves. They are just, well, created verbal text.

So, there are so many examples to think about. And amidst all this, as we can now surely see, South Slavic poets are only one of a whole cloud of witnesses. They are interesting indeed in their deployment of a genre that happens to have a greater stress on certain kinds of repetition than some other spoken or written forms. But they are not, for that reason and despite all Lord's genuinely illuminating analysis, either in any way iconic or of greater interest in themselves than others. *All* genres have their conventions and complexities, deployed and played with by particularistic human actors in particularistic cultural settings. That is how language is.

What is *not* helpful, I suggest, is to think of these or any texts as somehow forming a kind of glimpse into The Other – into some passive unchanging unchanged tradition that is quite different from ours in the binary great divide between two radically different states of human life. A few theorists and some popular thinking may still see it that way, especially in regard to Africa. Most do not. It is not supported by the facts of observation and analysis. Rather, now as always and everywhere, we live amid changing speech patterns, changing cultures, actively changing people and in the great and fine transits of continuing human history – and the beauties of language.

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Section I: Medieval Europe

