Oral Text: A South Indian Instance

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Once they both exist, orality and literacy are never independent of each other. There are traces of oral composition in written and printed texts, and written structures appear constantly in oral speech. The detection of oral influences in written texts and of written forms in oral texts requires a precise sense of what constitutes "the oral" and "the written." Making this distinction and applying it to special cases reveals cultural trends previously unnoticed. Walter J. Ong (1982:115) has discussed the tenacity of orality in the written English of the Tudor period by identifying those elements of written texts which are "oral" in nature: "use of epithets, balance, antithesis, formulary structures, and commonplace materials." Classical rhetoric, on the other hand, was the art of forcing speech to conform to priorities born in writing. Or in McLuhan's gnomic phrasing, "No one ever made a grammatical error in a pre-literate society" (1962:238).

Textual and ethnographic researches into the nature of orality have so far ignored circumstances wherein orality coexists with literacy and has not been completely swamped by written or printed speech forms. Milman Parry's important discovery that the oral antecedents of a written text are visible in attributes of the text itself has tended to obscure oral-literate coexistence by making it appear that the oral state simply was "written down" to make that text. But the very fact that Parry could make his discovery (since we are not tempted to consider his "orality" just an epiphenomenon of writing) means that something of the oral has persisted *along with* as well as through writing, to be recognized as oral elements in texts. The oral does not just disappear with writing, nor does it simply engage in states of mutual influence once writing and print are established. Orality and literacy are interdependent in a variety of fascinating ways.

This interdependence cannot be discerned in purely textual studies. Texts might betray oral-formulaic attributes without disclosing what sort of correspondence existed between speech and writing in the formation of the text or afterward. If there are any special textual marks of interdependence they have yet to be determined. Situations in which orality and literacy interact and influence each other must be observed and recorded in order to show the role of either. The classical texts which Parry and his followers examined no longer exist in this arrangement, nor do many of the other static texts studied by oral-formulaic methods. An examination of a present-day instance of oral-literate interaction will constitute a new type of ethnographic research and a contribution to the study of oral literature.

Stanley Tambiah in his pioneering study of literacy in a Thai Buddhist village (1968) has pointed to the complex interaction between mastery of written texts and oral improvisation in the Buddhist monks' presentation of doctrine: the doctrine is perpetuated by ever-constant written texts being constantly recast in oral exposition. Tambiah explicitly rejected the "great tradition-little tradition" characterization, which would set the written words of the monks off against the oral words of the people (1970:370-72), but sees in the activities of the literate cadres a traditional interdependence between textual prescription and ritual performance. Charles Keyes (1983:8-9) has developed Tambiah's argument, and together with other contributors to the volume on karma he coedited, has shown that this oral-literate interdependence is to be found in other South and Southeast Asian cultures, both Hindu and Buddhist.

It is instructive to examine both textually and ethnographically a Christian instance of literacy-orality interdependence in the same area. The state of Kerala in the southeast of India has the most literate population in the entire country. The literacy rate (about 60 percent) is much higher than the India average (29 percent, *Malayala Manorama Yearbook* 1984:407); the numbers of presses, newspapers, and books published are all large in proportion to the size of the population. One factor contributing to this has been the strong Christian presence in Kerala, nearly one-quarter of the approximately 25 million. Christian missionaries set up the first presses in Kerala and issued from them the first books and periodicals (Veliparambil 1981). But prior to the arrival of European Christians there were native

Christians in Kerala, the descendants of converts baptized by St. Thomas during the first century A.D. These Syrian Christians, reinforced by later missions from Syria and Persia, had adapted Christianity to Kerala Hinduism to a degree which exasperated the Roman Church hierarchy (Brown 1982:92-108). Among the adaptations to Kerala conditions were a liturgy and perhaps other texts originally written in the Syriac language but soon translated or transposed into Malayalam.

Today Syrian Christians possess a body of traditional "folk songs" sung at weddings, in honor of churches, and to accompany celebratory dances such as *maargamkali*. These songs are best known by the members of a Syrian Christian sub-group called the Knanaya. These people claim to have originated in a Syrian religious and trade mission led by Knayi Thommen (Thomas of Cana) which arrived in Kerala in 345 A.D. The Knanaya maintain that they have obeyed the original instructions of the Patriarch of Antioch and have preserved the pure "blood" and culture of their native land. During the parlous centuries which have intervened, the Knanaya themselves have been split into Roman Catholic and Jacobite (Eastern Christian) denominations while remaining ever loyal to their ideal of group endogamy. The current state of the "old songs" among the Knanaya is a subtle blend of orality and literacy which may itself be archaic.

In 1911 a full repertory of the "old songs" was copied down (or copied out) and published by P. U. Lukose in a book which Knanaya Catholics have reprinted several times, most recently in 1980. Lukose's preface is vague about the sources of the songs, citing mainly "ancient manuscripts." It is quite evident that he did not take the songs down directly from the singing of individual singers or collate the texts from a series of singers. Instead he already had written texts in the palm-leaf manuscripts held by ancient Syrian Christian families.

These texts were incised with a stylus upon the dried surface of the leaf of the coconut palm, the marks then darkened with black ink. This was the sole means of written transmission available to the literate prior to the introduction of print. Manuscripts and printed texts of any sort are notoriously short-lived in the climate of Kerala, with its long hot dry season followed by the protracted intense rain of the monsoon. Termites or "white ants" quickly devour any wood or pulp materials not naturally resistant to insect mandibles. The manuscripts which

Lukose examined were the temporary repositories of the songs copied and recopied generation after generation. On June 3, 1985, Mr. V. O. Abraham of Kottayam allowed me to examine some palm-leaf manuscripts of the wedding songs in his possession. He regretted that he had so few: the others in his family's possession had been locked up inside the parental home for years and were beyond recovery when the house was again opened.

My examination of Mr. Abraham's surviving manuscripts revealed the service that Lukose had performed for his community. It was not to print out the texts on paper, because the paper books produced were if anything flimsier than the palm-leaf manuscripts. The five editions required since the first printing in 1911 have been necessary to replace degenerating books, not to spread knowledge of the songs far and wide. Lukose cast the songs in a material far more lasting than palm leaves or paper: metal type. The original chases of type are stored and brought into service whenever a new edition is required. Succeeding bishops may add their prefaces (distinguishable by the slight differences in the type used as styles change and typographic mannerisms are dropped), but the text of the songs is now cast in type alloy which the insects and weather can attack in vain. Mr. E. T. Lukose of Chingavanam has in a similar manner preserved the text of an important church history, *The History of the Indian Churches of St. Thomas* (1869) by E. M. Phillipose, which his grandfather had translated into Malayalam and set in type. In the absence of offset photolithography, keeping the type chases is the most effective way of preserving valued written texts against natural ravages.

Mr. Abraham's manuscripts correspond verbatim with Lukose's book in the instances I was able to check. The preservation of the song texts passed from the palm-leaf manuscript into type and there were perpetuated more efficiently but not more elegantly than in the manuscripts. The movement from manuscript into print was not motivated by a fear the songs might die out if not made over into print. This idea is the result of Western typocentrism, the assumption that print makes its contents immortal, and shows a failure to appreciate the stability of texts in oral transmission, or at least a failure to appreciate people's feeling of assurance that oral transmission is stable.

Typocentric bias artificializes the sense of an oral text. The study of English ballads, for instance, is preoccupied with

determining variants and trying to establish earlier and later texts (Hendron 1961). Variants exist only because the stable moment of the printed text allows a fixed determination of words and meter. The folk community might not even distinguish one major ballad from another. Print makes labeling and numbering of ballads possible. The belief that a song is "preserved" in print is ironic, since the song is its own performance and that performance is not preserved. All that remains is scholarly invention. When a community deliberately sets down its songs in print, it is not always to render them into textual icons or to preserve them in the absence of an active singing tradition. From the community's viewpoint it is just as well to let irrelevant songs die out.

Print is, however, integrated into living oral tradition. Lukose's book cannot stand as a "collection" of the old songs. In the first place the book is the printed continuation of an existing written-oral tradition and not a first written record of oral songs; in the second place the book exists only within the context of that tradition. There is much the book does not say. It does not give melodies or describe occasions of singing because all this is obvious to those who have any use for the printed texts. The book perpetuates a written text with a very special relationship to oral performance.

The written-oral tradition whose continuation the book facilitates is the singing of wedding songs. The Syrian Christians preserved an elaborate series of wedding customs which surrounded the formal church service with several weeks of ritual and feasting (Swiderski 1986). The Kerala anthropologist Ananthakrishna Ayyer obtained detailed accounts of these customs from Christians of different denominations during the 1920's. His account (1926) has been seconded and extended by the writings of P. J. Thomas (1935), who glossed the songs with reference to practices. Though the history of the rituals' development is difficult to trace, it is clear that they are the result of Near Eastern, particularly Jewish, elements combining with native Hindu elements. The songs are sung for the ceremonial adornment of the bride with henna on the eve of the wedding (*mailanjiri*), at the first shaving of the bridegroom (*anthamcharthu*), at the decoration of the marriage *pandal* or canopy, at the reception after the wedding, while the bride's mother blesses the pair, during the exhibition of the couples' wedding gifts, and for a ceremony called *adachathura*, a few days after the wedding, when the bride's mother and other

female relatives plead with the bridegroom to open the bridal chamber.

The women of both the bride's and groom's families sing the songs in chorus. They sit in rows upon the floor of the *pandal* and sing in unison. A strict sexual division is maintained throughout the wedding as throughout traditional Indian life. It is a woman's accomplishment to know the songs well. Mothers coach daughters in singing from early youth and take pride in the girls' precocious mastery of the texts. Men may learn the songs as well, but never with such deliberateness, perfection, and concentration as the women. The women sing and the men listen and join in.

The written or printed form of the songs is completely integrated into the transmission of performance. Mothers teach their daughters from Lukose's book as they did once from the palm-leaf manuscripts. Though children and adults have memorized the songs completely, they must have the book while singing. They are willing to sing out of the wedding context, but only with the book. It need not be open to the song being performed, just present. Thus elderly women who had sung the same songs in weddings all their lives would not begin to sing until assured that a copy of Lukose was in the vicinity. Two young girls who had won prizes in competitions began singing a wedding song but then halted when their mother reminded them they must have the book. An elderly couple began to intone the Mar Thommen *pattu*, the first song in Lukose's compilation, as they hunted through the rafters of their thatched house, the main storage place for documents, in search of their copy of Lukose. Women singing in wedding choruses have the book with them. Every Knanaya household has a copy somewhere.

During the Jacobite and Catholic church services the priest chants the liturgy, which he knows by memory, from a book open before him. In their customary singing the Christian women have created their own secular version of the sacred service. Book-dependence has become the defining standard of wedding song.

The analogy to priestly practice is not the most compelling reason for this interdependence of orality and text. That must be sought in the nature of the weddings themselves. Weddings were the occasion of alliance between kinship groupings. The sumptuous feasts and gift-giving were the beginnings of exchange and trade between groups perhaps set apart from each other by distance.

Kerala is a land severely divided by its topography. In order to avoid incest, Christians had to look outside their own immediate communities for marriage partners and thus form or reassert alliances with other distant settlements. Since the songs were performed publicly at weddings by women singing together, they had to be consistent, to be one sign of the unity achieved in the wedding, first within the respective families and then within the entire wedding party. There could be no disagreement between groups and individuals over the wording of the songs. The natural differentiation of songs in a purely oral culture would have been quite audible when two parties came together and tried to sing the songs. The resultant dissonance would have been damaging to the desired social harmony. The social circumstances of the wedding required a stabilizing device. Something had to regulate the texts and make each group's sense of oral stability subject to a standard, reducing confrontations at the most vulnerable moment. A woman starting in to sing the songs did not want the realization of isolation but the experience of Christian and Knanaya community inherent in knowing precisely the same words as a woman from another village. Not only the text, but the oral text, had to be standardized. Book-dependent singing was the result.

The current texts of the songs themselves are a product of this engineered social harmony of weddings. Internal linguistic evidence, the historical state of the Malayalam language, and the presence of Portuguese loanwords in the texts (Choondal 1983:54-55; 81-88) date the "old songs" to the seventeenth century. There were Christian songs prior to this point—they were sung by native Christian communities to greet foreign bishops (Hosten 1928:122-24)—but the songs which Lukose printed and which are sung today were composed in a post-contact language. Their language, prosody, and subjects make them appear to be the works of literate priests rather than the spontaneous outpourings of folk bards. Scholars of Malayalam literature, even Christian scholars, disdain to discuss the songs at all, or relegate them to the lowest rank: "they are not good examples of sublime poetry or folksongs of Kerala" (Choondal 1980:39).

The *Mailanjipattu*, the second song in Lukose's collection (1980:2-4) is sung as the bride receives an application of henna to her palms and the soles of her feet. Syrian Christians say (as does the text) that this is a reminder that Eve walked on her feet to take the forbidden fruit and handed it to Adam with her hands.

The adornment is a common cosmetic practice in India and the Near East among all social and religious groups and is not associated strictly with weddings. But the Christians have made it their own.

The song is divided into five *padams*, or parts. The first *padam*, for example, is as follows.

1. māṟānarul ceytīlōkēyannu niṙavēri
2. ēṙrinalguṇaṅṅalellāṁ bhramimēlorēṭaṁ
3. orumayuṭayōṅ pērumakoṇḍu karuti maṇpiṭičču
4. piṭičča karuvilaṭakkam nēṭi puṙattu tukal potiṅṅu
5. tukalakmē cōranīrum elluṁ māṁsadhatukkal
6. bhratikaḷkku vātilaṅ̌jum navadvāraṅṅaḷāyattu
7. raṇḍāṭu nālum nāluviralkku čuvappunakhaṇḍal pattu
8. pattuṭayoṅèṙayakattuṭayōnāya koṭuttuṇarttyōrātmāvum
9. ātmāvum koṭuttu perumiṭṭōrābhamennu
10. enašēšaminniččāllāmunniniṇḍaḷ kēḷppin

By the command of the Lord man (lit. world-dweller) was made
endowed with all qualities out of chaos
came unity. To prepare for the birth He grasped mud
and with a tool shaped it into a mass.
Within it the blood flowed and the muscles were arrayed.
For prosperity God's place was housed amid the nine apertures.
Two hands, ten fingers with nails all red
the ten all afire, and the dancing soul was granted.
The soul bestowed, powerful Adam
without hesitation made heard the very first words.

This is not the place for a detailed investigation of the doctrine or of the prosody of the songs. That would be the task of a much more philological study. The idea of the creation owes something to the Book of Genesis, but even more to Hindu conceptions of the human frame and life. The reference to "vātilaṅ̌jum navadvaraṅṅaḷ," "great room [God's dwelling] among the nine [bodily] apertures," evokes a line in the Krishnagatha composed by the fifteenth-century Nambudiri (Brahman) poet Cherusseri. The author of the *Mailanjippattu* simply substituted the Christian God for Krishna in Cherusseri's phrase, and apparently was more eager to call attention to his knowledge of an outstanding monument of

Malayalam literature than to preserve strict Christian dogma. Further evidence of the song writer's literary motives is the number of Sanskritisms, notably *ātmāvum* ("soul"), which Cherusseri, identifying himself as a Malayalam poet, preferred to avoid.

Off against the certainty of Krishnagatha reference is the uncertainty of the Biblical references. There was no written Malayalam Bible prior to 1811 (George 1972:62). Bibles in Syriac and in European languages were available before that time, but do not seem to have exercised a decisive effect upon the language and doctrine of the song. Perhaps it is best to assume that the author of the *Mailanjipattu* knew the Bible only as refracted through legendry and was guided by the poetic standards rather than by a wish to adhere to any Bible text. Certainly the burning red of the nails and the words first uttered by the created being, both connoting the power which surges out of the freshly endowed body, are more consistent with a poetic imagery of popular Hinduism than with the Biblical description of the creation. The red nails of the male—characteristic of Hindu votaries today—connote a generative power while the red on the palms and soles of the female is, as both the fourth *padam* and some commentators declare, a reminder of Eve's sinfulness. Perhaps here we are simply lacking part of the ritual context: males (instead of or in addition to females) receive henna in some Near Eastern wedding rituals, and may have in earlier Knanaya practice. The male generativity is positive, while the female is negative and smothered beneath a label of sin. In fact henna is an erotic enhancement for both sexes. None of this derives from the Bible and the ideas would be discouraged by a knowledge of Biblical teachings and imagery.

The prosody of the song does not follow any of the classic Malayalam meters. The Malayalam folk songs collected prior to the spread of literacy include some wedding songs, *kalyanampattvkal* (Nair 1967:41), but they clearly were not the model for the Syrian Christian songs. The meter is free and loose, though it may move into conformity with meters of Biblical psalms. The song has characteristics of oral composition: repetitions in the form of carry-overs from one line to the next in lines 3-4 (*piṭičču-piṭičča*), 7-8 (*pattu-pattu*), and 8-9 (*ātmāvum-ātmāvum*), and simple repetitions within and among lines, 4-5 (*tukal-tukkal*), 7 (*nālum-nālu*), 8 (*..tayōn-..tayōn*), and 8-9 (*koṭuttu-koṭuttu*), but

these may be in imitation of the style of the Hindu Malayalam folksongs, which were often imitated by literate poets.

Another oral element in the *mailanjiri* song text is the presence of stock phrases, from the beginning "māŕānarul" to "vātilańǰum navadvārańńaḷ and "čuvappunakhaṇḍal." Several of these repetitions are Sanskritisms. Ramanujan (1973:46), analyzing the poetics of medieval Kannada devotional poetry, has pointed to effective use of Sanskrit words and quotations in these oral folk compositions. The presence of Sanskritisms in the Syrian Christian songs does not automatically exclude them from the category of folksong. They complicate the issue: the Sanskritisms may be the author's attempt to imitate folksongs or an attempt to render existing folksongs more literary. The Sanskritisms are not used consistently throughout the text, nor are they accompanied by others one might expect to find or by the epithets and names which Malayalam ballads and folksongs contain in abundance.

The authors of these texts may have been imitating a written source which was itself oral in some features, such as a Malayalam version of the Bible. Choondal in his translation of this text (1983:35) seems so taken with the Biblical quality that he gives the ending of King James Genesis 2:7 without even bothering to translate the difficult Sanskritic Malayalam. The source and inspiration of this text must be thoroughly investigated in another study. It has all the earmarks of a written composition whose author(s) were subject to a number of influences, including written and oral folksongs, Malayalam and Sanskrit religious texts, and perhaps specific model wedding songs oral or written in Syriac, Tamil, or Malayalam.

However the songs may have originated, they soon were fixed in the peculiar ecology of writing and orality that comprises their current practice and perpetuation. The Knanaya today call the songs *puthanapattukal*, "old songs," and believe that they are of ancient origin because of their archaic language and their references to ancient events. Some even claim that the songs were translated from Syriac originals. Few of the people who sing the songs today know exactly what they mean. When I asked singers to explain a song in Malayalam, they resorted to describing the wedding ritual which the song accompanies or offered only the most general account of the text. Those knowing English or Hindi were incapable of providing consistent translations. The only songs which people understood reasonably well were simple prayers such

as the first song in Lukose's volume, the Mar Thommen *pattu*, which is sung throughout the ceremonies, and the historical songs, especially *Nalloruosalem*, "The Good Jerusalem," which describes the voyage of Knayi Thommen and his companions to revive Christianity in Malabar. The songs record Knanaya historical dogma: an elderly man I asked about the origins of the Knanaya sang *Nalloruosalem* as he searched for a copy of his book. The historical songs also serve as a "catechism" to teach children community history through texts of obvious venerability. The Knanaya diocese of Kottayam has published texts which ask catechism questions about the history in the songs. But those songs not connected with basic issues of community identity are the province of scholars and remain simply revered words in rhythm to the singers.

For most of the singers the songs exist on the page and yet off the page at the same time. Though preserved in type and as print, the words are not expected to mean as printed words mean. The criteria which Malayalam readers apply to the printed words of newspapers and books do not apply to the text of the old songs. The words are allowed to rest unmeaning and formulaic in their nest of paper. When they are sung during the wedding, they are an oral tradition passed on for generations. The singers see no contradiction in this.

The Knanaya assume the songs were handed down orally for many generations. Print is an auxiliary which confirms oral purity. The Knanaya do not recognize the variations and transformations of oral transmission. It is basic to their sense of communal identity that they have been able to transmit the same texts from the remotest era of the past down to the present. *The present day performance of the songs—and not the form of the texts—confirms the agelessness of the community.* Even if the songs can be shown to have been composed in writing during the seventeenth century, that merely was one way-station in an ongoing tradition. Written and oral texts are locked together in timeless verification of community experience. The oral tradition has the stability of print, which is the stability of the community. This concept of community history is itself typical of a "print" culture. The Knanaya invest orality with the integrity of print: oral performances are spontaneous yet always the same and refer back to their origins. The Knanaya experience their own unshakable historical authenticity when they sing the songs together on the

right occasions. Their sense of the songs' antiquity emerges out of the ritual moment of performance. But unlike mere oral performances the songs stand in print outside the moment of singing and are charged with the ancientness of that moment.

The oral text of the songs is manifest in performance. Neither orality nor textuality alone determines this. The wedding customs are the context for both text and its performance. Any account of the oral text must move back to focus upon the circumstances of performance. The stability of the printed texts seems to guarantee a perfectly routine singing each time. The sense of a permanent and ancient text is united with a sense of uniform communal memory in the singing of the wedding songs. But the singing itself is just an appearance.

Lukose's texts are not printed with music but only with indications of change in tune. The music is in the singing. The absence of these indications of course is consistent with the impression of the text's unchangingness: all the singers know and transmit the same melody to the next generation. Something in the tradition of the community keeps the singing the same everywhere.

But when the women sing the songs alone, they sing them differently from each other. It is difficult to persuade them to sing alone. Women asked to sing will summon a friend or relative to join them. I asked each of three elderly women to sing the Mar Thommen *pattu* in the presence of the others. Each offered the same text with a strikingly different melody. Yet when they sang the same text together, they merged into a common melody which was again different from what any one of them had sung. Different groups of women exhibited the same divergence and convergence. The converged melody of one group was not the same as that of another separate group.

It is not so much that the same melodies have been passed down over the centuries orally accompanying the transmission of the written texts. The convergence of the group in singing is what has been passed down and remains the same. Whatever melody is the result emerges from their coming together. The melody is inherent in the social context of performance. Women from different areas who have learned different styles of singing blend their voices in a common performance signaled by the stable text. It will always be the same performance and will give the impression of having been the same in performance. The

"writtenness" of the text projects the attributes of its orality; the performed orality has the sameness of writing.

Signs of a comparable oral text among South Indian Jews appear in the growing literature on their traditional wedding songs. P. M. Jussaye (1986) and Marcia Walerstein (1982), each of whom has made a field study of the customs of Cochini Jews, report that the wedding songs are recorded in notebooks kept by the women. Neither provides information on the transmission of the songs from one generation to the next or details of sung performance. The nature of the oral text transmission in this community may be impossible to determine. Most of the Cochini Jews have migrated to Israel. According to Walerstein, who has attended their weddings there, though the older women continue to sing the Malayalam wedding songs from memory and from notebooks, the younger generation prefer popular Israeli songs in Hebrew. The Knanaya claim an affinity with the Cochini Jews: a comparative study of the content of the wedding songs of both groups would be very instructive. Weil (1982) has adduced a few common features as evidence of "cultural symmetry" between the Knanaya and Cochini Jews. More exhaustive study might reveal that the Knanaya oral text is but one example of a *type* of oral tradition to literate peoples of South India. There is the even more tantilizing possibility of Near Eastern connections. The Knanaya oral text may just be the most visible instance.

Since the performance of the wedding songs is (for the Knanaya) the same as the text, it is not surprising that with the means now available the performance has also been "written," that is filmed and taped. In 1980 the folklorist Chummar Choondal produced a film, "Suriani Kristianikalude Kalyanam" ("Marriage Celebrations of Saint Thomas Christians in India"). The film is a cursory and somewhat fanciful re-creation of a Knanaya upperclass marriage of an earlier age: the wedding party arrives by boat and leaves the church ground in procession, the married couple atop an elephant. For this film Father Jacob Vellian supervised the recording of some wedding songs. He subsequently issued a cassette tape of the sound track with a few additional numbers. Most of the selections are *a capella* choruses with only a chime to mark the time, but one in particular, *Nalloruosalem*, has a full orchestration that makes it sound like a movie musical song. Colleagues in the church have criticized Father Vellian for this production. He maintains that he used "authentic" Syrian Church

melodies throughout and adhered faithfully to Lukose's text.

The tape has become a runaway success among the Knanaya, and has sold out repeatedly at the Kottayam diocese bookstore. Cassette tapes and not records are the main means of popular music dissemination in Kerala, and with this tape the old songs have taken their place among movie musical soundtracks which are the mainstay of popular music. While the audience for the songs is small by comparison with the audience even for other types of Christian popular music, the recording has assumed a special place. Pop music fills the air in Kerala. Young people want to play songs at their weddings. The old songs in themselves are irrelevant and incomprehensible; the rites are no longer performed or have degenerated into horseplay. There is a great deal of drinking at weddings. The tape allows anyone, even poor people, to present pop music that is also appropriate to the wedding. The performances on the tape are so accomplished that they set a standard. Those who want to sing can sing along with the tape. It is just a slight change from the commanding choral singing of the old days. I attended weddings during which the tape played on without any connection to rituals, in fact without any rituals. By entering the electronic medium, the oral text lingers even after the wedding rites for which it was contrived have passed away. In Kenya, Australia, and America, Knanaya are wed to the sound of the ancient songs, all the more ancient because the songs have become as deathless in perfomance as they are in text.

The interdependence of orality and literacy in a text has in the old songs of the Knanaya found a consummation in recording, which eliminates all uncertainty and change. The relationship between the two is special to the wedding, the purpose of the wedding, and the cultural meaning of the wedding. Oral texts hold together the two dimensions of experience to form a cultural icon. For the Knanaya it is an icon of permanence and rigid consistency. Other oral texts will characterize the cultures of their performance. They offer a new dimension in the study of oral literature (a very meaningful phrase) which can now proceed to the role of orality in the electronic media. Writing and media do not extinguish orality but become its partner in the perpetuation and transformation of cultural traditions.

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