

Preface

This volume, *Master Poets, Ritual Masters*, is a study in oral formulaic composition. It takes its lead from one of the great classics in the study of oral composition, Albert Lord's *The Singer of Tales* (1960). From the outset, however, this study diverges from one of the premises of that study.

Drawing on the earlier researches of Milman Parry, Lord (1960) puts forward Parry's definition of an 'oral formula': 'a group of words which is regularly employed *under the same metrical conditions* to express a given essential idea' (1960: 4).

This definition assumes that all oral poetry is structured by metre, whereas much of the world's oral poetry does not rely on metre, but instead utilises other compositional devices. This is particularly the case with poetry composed according to rules of strict canonical parallelism.

Over many decades, I have endeavoured to document the extent and distribution of canonical parallelism in the world's oral literatures, from the earliest Sumerian poetry to contemporary practices in Asia and the Americas. These traditions are both diverse and persistent in South-East Asia, particularly in Indonesia and in the Maya world (see Fox 2014: 1–90).

Like Lord's study, this study is also a study of oral formulae, but it seeks to define the notion of the formula in other contexts. One could modify Parry's definition for this purpose by stating that an oral formula in this study consists of 'a group of words which is regularly employed *under the conditions of strict parallelism* to express a given essential idea'.

This study looks at simple formulae based on the strict pairing of words and also at more complex formulae that are composed of several recognisable formula pairs.

This study also differs from Lord's study in another fundamental way. Parry and Lord both carried out their research chiefly among a few remarkable oral poets. By contrast, in my research since 1965 on the island of Rote in eastern Indonesia, I have been able to work with and record many dozens of locally acknowledged and exceptionally able oral poets.

This book examines the oral compositions of some 17 different poets. The first half of this volume focuses on master poets from just one dialect or speech community on the island; the second half looks at the compositions of poets from six different dialect areas on the island.

This study is a strategic distillation of some of the finest examples of one of the most beautiful ritual compositions on the island. I was fortunate in being able to begin my recording of this particular composition in 1965, and have continued to record versions of it until 2014. This book thus covers a period of 50 years of research on Rotenese formulaic language.

Although it may differ from Lord's and Parry's work in particular respects, I hope this study may also be considered as a continuation of the research of the many scholars who have advanced research on oral poetic theory. This is a comparative study that ranges across time and place, but I would hope that each of the separate compositions recorded and translated here might also be appreciated individually as a distinctive expression of a striking mode of oral poetry.

This text is taken from *Master Poets, Ritual Masters: The Art of Oral Composition Among the Rotenese of Eastern Indonesia*, by James J. Fox, published 2016 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.