Documenting Ceremonial Dialogues: An in vitro performance and the problem of textualisation

MARTIN GAENSZLE

_____

_____

Documenting Ceremonial Dialogues: An in vitro performance and the problem of textualisation

Martin Gaenszle, University of Vienna

1. Introduction

The more general topic of this paper is the problem of turning oral discourse into a written text, i.e. what is usually termed 'transcription' and, if edited in some way (through standardisation, glossing, translation, etc.), 'textualisation'. This is, of course, one of the major tasks of language documentation, but though much has been written on the subject (e.g., Ricoeur 1971, Ong 1982, Finnegan 1992) and most fieldworkers have found a practicable approach, the transformation of speech into texts remains a complex and problematic process. Its success is often just taken for granted and scarcely reflected upon. It is no coincidence that there is not even a term that has found general acceptance. As 'textualisation' presupposes that oral discourse is not textual, the term has been criticised by authors who maintain that textuality is not restricted to written discourse, and that there are good reasons to speak of oral texts (Finnegan 1977, Hanks 1989). Others have used terms like 'literisation' in order to stress that what we are dealing with is a process of writing things down in letters (see Pollock 2006). The latter author further distinguishes this term from 'literalisation', which is the process of turning texts into canonical literature. This is an important distinction, as written texts are always constructions that tend to develop their own social lives and usages. Another term in use is 'scripturalisation' (which I myself have used as an equivalent of the less problematic German term *Verschriftlichung*), but again, this term has some drawbacks as it tends to evoke 'scripture' in a Christian sense. Further terms in currency are 'scriptualisation' (trying to avoid the latter problem), or 'graphisation' (referring, in a more limited sense, to the development of a proper script, see Mesthrie et al. 2009: 389).

This process, which in this article I will, as a matter of convention, refer to as textualisation, is particularly problematic in the case of dialogic discourse. Much of ritual speech is monologic (invocations, chants, recitations), and this is difficult enough to textualise. But in the case of dialogic ritual speech, features like turn-taking, overlaps, multiple speakers etc. can turn the task into a rather challenging enterprise. As ritual discourse tends to have a textual structure, the major question is: how can one bring out this structure and

distinguish it from the contingencies of a live performance? Or more specifically: is it methodologically legitimate to stage a performance in order to make it more comprehensible? I will deal with this general issue by looking at a specific case: the recording of a ceremonial wedding dialogue among the Mewahang Rai in East Nepal.

2. Ceremonial Dialogues during Rai weddings[1]

The Mewahang Rai are a Kiranti group (speaking a Tibeto-Burman language) belonging to the 'tribal' populations of Eastern Nepal. The wedding dialogues discussed here can be seen as a form of exchange: the exchange of words. In fact, one can argue that words are given and received almost like gifts. This is, in fact, the view often expressed by the Mewahang themselves: ritual speaking is a form of offering, a way to make the addressee happy using polite and ornamental speech forms.

2.1 Ritual speech genres among the Rai

Generally, ritual speech is an important part of most ritual behaviour among the Rai. Simple formal interactions like requests for a loan or parting after a gathering are accompanied by little speeches, ancestor spirits are addressed in a special idiom by the common householders, and complex rituals involving sacrifices to the ancestral deities focus on the elaborate ritual invocations voiced by the initiated and knowledgeable elders. One could say that ritual speech is seen as a powerful means for constituting and manipulating social reality. As this ritual way of speaking is, like all speech, essentially dialogic in character, it is also a form of social interaction. Those who possess the proper speech competence, mainly the elders, also possess valued social skills, prestige and power.

The corpus of Rai oral tradition is known as *muddum* (Gaenszle 2002). This term comprises the whole of the traditional mythology, i.e. the narratives

---

[1] T. = Turner 1931. N = Nepali, M = Mewahang, M* = Mewahang ritual language, Sk. = Sanskrit. Transliteration of Mewahang according to Gaenszle 2002.

about the deeds, creations and migrations of the ancestors, as well as the proper forms of dealing with ancestors and other distinguished persons through ritual speech. For the Mewahang, the *muddum* stands for their ancient ways, their traditional customs and life-style, their culture.

Thus an important part of the *muddum* consists of ritual texts. These are recited in a special ritual language, the style of which varies according to the context. The most prominent feature of this ritual language is its recurrent parallelism. This is particularly evident at the level of nouns, which usually consist of binomials: e.g. the ordinary word for 'house' is *khɨm*, the ritual expression is *khatiru duŋmaru*. But also at the syntactic level or at the level of verse form, different kinds of parallelism are common.

It can be shown that the various speech forms that are part of the *muddum* can be classified according to a continuum. On the one end are the highly formal (and formulaic) recitations of the expert priests and shamans, consisting almost entirely of ritual expressions; on the other end are the ceremonial speech forms, which also contain ritual expressions, but are still dominated by colloquial speech (ordinary language), often even switching to Nepali.

The genres at the formal end of the continuum are characterized by a high degree of entextualisation, i.e. 'a process in which a speech event (or series of speech events) is marked by increasing thoroughness of poetic and rhetorical patterning and growing levels of (apparent) detachment from the immediate pragmatic context' (Kuipers 1990: 4). On the other end, they are characterized by a high degree of contextualisation, i.e. a process through which 'actors link discourse indexically to its immediate circumstances of utterance' (Kuipers 1990: 7). In other words, the speaker must be continuously aware of the social circumstances and modify pre-existent text forms to 'fit' the situation.

The ceremonial dialogues that I will consider in this paper belong to the latter category. They seem to be a typical feature of Rai (or Kiranti) culture.[2]

---

[2] The only other evidence for such a tradition I have found is documented among the Newar Buddhists (Gellner 1992: 228ff.), who, though now strongly influenced by North Indian ideas, are distantly related to the Kiranti linguistic group.

2.2 Marriage transactions

Most Rai groups see the creation of a marriage bond as a process, sometimes quite long (for a more detailed description see Gaenszle 2000: 169ff.). It usually takes many years (sometimes children are already quite grown-up) until all marriage rituals are completed and the rights over the bride have been passed from her parental line (*māiti*) to that of her husband (*kuṭumba*), thus making her a member of his clan. This situation reflects the constant possibility of divorce, which is relatively easy before the rituals are completed. Thus it is a marriage on trial, its terms are open to negotiation for quite some time, not only for the couple but also for others who are involved.

The wedding ceremonies fall in two parts: the Small Wedding (*sāno bihā*) and the Big Wedding (*ṭhulo bihā*). I will sketch the main prestational and judicial features of these two stages along with the accompanying formal interaction and exchange of ritual speeches.

An essential ritual act of the Small Wedding is the *sāinu pherāunu*, during which, with displays of mutual respect, the forms of address consisting of the new (affinal) kinship terms are 'introduced' between the bridegroom and the woman's near relations. But what is of major significance for the legal recognition of the marriage is the ritual dialogue between two village elders (*purkhā* N, *pasuŋ* M) in the bride's house (ideally, but not necessarily, they belong to the *kalliyā*). This dialogue, which is later conducted in a similar manner during the Big Wedding (and will be discussed in detail below), is here called *bāgdattā* N (*vāgdattā* Sk '"given by word of mouth," promised... a betrothed virgin' (Monier-Williams 1899: 936). This term thus implies a kind of betrothal, the making of a promise.

By means of this *bāgdattā*, the bridegroom is accorded certain rights with respect to the woman, such as the full legitimacy of their offspring and partial claims upon her labour capacity; further, the conditions for divorce are defined for both sides (see below). The woman, however, remains a member of her paternal clan, which continues to take responsibility for her acts, and with which she maintains close ties - for instance, by frequent visits to her *māiti* N ('wife's parents' house'), in whose household ancestral shrine (*khamaŋ* M) she would reside in case she died before the celebration of the Big Wedding. Thus the husband or his clan is not in 'possession' of the wife; full rights over her are rather merely 'promised'. One might also call this ritual a form of betrothal.

Still other legal implications of the Small Wedding are concretely referred to in the *bāgdattā*. The crucial point is the case of divorce. This eventuality is evoked at a key moment, the highpoint of the ritual, as it also is in the

analogous ceremonial dialogue of the Big Wedding, the *dhito dhāraṇ* (see below for the meaning of this expression). If the woman commits adultery, which is revealingly termed *kuṭumbakhat*,[3] the cuckolded husband may claim compensation. Divorce is thus relatively easy to obtain: it is a matter of negotiation over the expenses. After the Small Wedding the wife usually remains for some time in the house of her parents (*māiti*), it being only after the birth of the first child that the husband is able to persuade her to move in with him.

Eventually, when the time is ripe and the groom's side is able to afford the expenses, the Big Wedding will be held. The most important prestation to the bride's side during the Big Wedding - the actual bride wealth – is called *ṭhulo kośeli* N ('large gift'). The actual handing over of the bride takes place, however, in analogy to the *bāgdattā* of the Small Wedding, during a ceremonial dialogue called *dhito dhāraṇ* N (*dhito* N 'security, pledge' T.328; *dhāraṇa* 'keeping in remembrance, a good memory', *dhāraṇ-dhit* N adj. 'trustworthy' T.327). This will be summarized below.

Suffice it to point out here that once this ritual is over, the woman is irrevocably detached from her natal clan, and she becomes a member of her husband's clan. This is reflected, for instance, in the fact that after her death her natal relatives need not perform mourning rites, this now being the duty of her husband's clan; her death spirit therewith enters into the domestic ancestral shrine (*khamaŋ* M) of her spouse. Significantly, should the man or the woman die before the Big Wedding is completed, the *dhito dhāraṇ* may even be celebrated with the laid out corpse, clearly demonstrating the judicial significance of this ritual.

3. Problems of recording

Weddings are usually a somewhat chaotic business, and so it is not easy to record such a ceremonial dialogue. In my first experience of a Mewahang Rai wedding in December 1984, I did not really understand what was going on. There were tensions between the bride's side and the groom's side already from the start. Apparently the bride-wealth given by the groom's side was a

---

[3] *kuṭumba* N 'family, relations, esp. relatives of daughter's husband' T.96; *khat* N 'spot, mark, scar; fault; accusation' T.113. In fact, as will be shown later, *kuṭumba* has essentially means 'wife-taker', and adultery is therefore regarded as a crime against the latter.

bit stingy, and on top of it, there was some disagreement about the correct procedure. Therefore, things were dragging on until late into the night. Two dozen people were crammed into the house. Women were busy serving food and beer, guests were coming and going, and most participants were slowly getting drunk. Meanwhile, there were formal dialogues. But these were interrupted again and again. It was difficult to find a place to set up a tape recorder, and as things became more and more heated – the bride-givers were unwilling to give the bride – it was pretty noisy. Apart from this, one side of the speakers was rather weak, the groom's side being clearly more eloquent.

My recordings were rather bad, incomprehensible, and as the whole event was spread over some 7 hours, crucial parts were missing. So what could I do? Realising more and more that ritual speech was the crux of the whole wedding, I decided that I had to secure a better recording. But during my first stay, there was no further event, so in spring, after I had pointed out the problem to my assistant, he came up with an idea: we could stage a performance.

For my friends in Bala village this was not really a problem. Without much ado (and without any specific instructions from my side), they set up a situation in which 'the whole of the wedding dialogues' – i.e. the speech forms from the first negotiations among mediators to the final *dhito dhāraṇ* – was performed. The only condition was that we had the whole night – and a canister (5 litres) of local liquor (*raksi*). So, I arranged for this and we were set for a long 8-hour session.

I have to say that I was surprised how easily the knowledgeable elders whom we had invited play-acted the scenes. It was almost like a professional theatre drama, and they were all good actors (even miming side-characters like the worried grandmother or a yelling uncle). Above all, everyone had great fun.

Such a staged or in vitro performance (lit. 'behind glass') is not usually what one goes for in the ethnography of speaking. As András Höfer (1992: 17) stated in his *Six Proposals for an Ethnography of the Performed Word*:

> Unless impossible for technical reasons, texts should be recorded in situ, i.e., in the in-performance situation. As experiences show, their reproduction in vitro is likely to confuse or even embarrass the informant asked to dictate, phrase by phrase and "in prose", a text which he has memorized, and is used to perform, in a chanted form only. Indoor, studio-recording of a chanted version by the ethnographer might be objected on grounds that it would be inauspicious (…) In any case, artificial reproduction – whether dictated or chanted – necessarily results in an artificial product (…).

So, is such a recording useful for scholarly research? I think that it is, for me it was a mine for the study of the Mewahang language and associated cultural traditions. It was a good entry point to these ceremonial rhetorics, and it was also important to read this material against other recordings of 'real' live performances.

To be clear, I will first reflect on the staged performance, and then compare it with an in situ recording.

4. In vitro performance: a staged ceremonial dialogue

I will now discuss in more detail the rhetorics and formula involved in the ceremonial dialogue held at the climax of the Big Wedding: the *dhito dhāraṇ*. Like the *bāgdattā* during the Small Wedding, this is held by two knowledgeable elders, one from each side, in the house of the bride's parents, usually late at night after most other ceremonies are completed. Taking the transcription of a field recording as a textual document, I will concentrate on the following questions: How do the two parties deal with each other? What issues do the speakers raise? What is the meaning and intention of the whole performance?

One feature, which is characteristic of all speaking exchanges between wife-givers and wife-takers, is the almost exaggerated emphasis on the wife-givers' superiority by the wife-takers. This comes out most clearly in the expression *māitirājā* ('wife-giver king') that is continuously used by the wife-takers as a term of respect and submission. Sometimes the wife-giver kings are likened to mountains and snow peaks (*māitirājā pahar, māitirājā himālculi*), thus expressing their status of 'highness' in a truly Himalayan metaphoric idiom (similar expressions are used among the Kham Magar in marriage dialogues, see Oppitz 1991: 333, 453).

This hierarchical relationship is constantly expressed in various ways. Consider the following passage from the opening section of the dialogue.

> Wife-takers: 'O Wife-giver Kings, we feel no shame even at the house of the Wife-giver Kings,
>
> the more we eat, the better it tastes, like the peaches of Sunny Village,
>
> our Wife-giver Kings have (already) given us, but we will come again like persons who have developed a craving,
>
> we do not know to speak or to sing in the proper way,
>
> whereas you know to speak in the Weaving Way' (*thakchakhi becakhi* M*).

Here reference is made to the obstinate insistence of the wife-takers, who come again and again with requests, and enjoy the hospitality of the wife-givers. That the wife-takers have brought numerous prestations by that time is generously ignored. Rather, they stress their ignorance in matters of ritual speech (*yakhiwa risiwa* M*) which, of course, is a gross understatement. Precisely this kind of exaggerated modesty is typical for the wife-taker's way of speaking.

They are so modest, in fact, that they hardly dare to speak out about what they want. Instead of asking for the bride, the wife-takers speak, in the ritual idiom, of their 'hope' which is in their mind (*mismako* M*). When eventually they come to the crucial part, indicating their request for the actual pledge (*dhito* N) by referring to their last remaining 'hope', the wife-givers even act as if they didn't know what else they could want.

> Wife-givers: 'I don't know. What could their Wish be? I thought this is all what there is to be given.
>
> Ask them nicely. What then is their Wish?'
>
> Wife-takers: 'O respected men! Wife-giver Kings! We ask for the Pledge' (*dhito*).

After this last request has been announced, the wife-givers (bride's F, FB, MB, FF)[4] consult among themselves what should be done. The impression is given that they are still wavering and reluctant to actually 'give away' their daughter. But they also know that they have already yielded to the wife-takers' requests to a large degree – particularly by accepting the marriage prestations. This is repeatedly emphasized through formulaic parallel expressions (partly in Mewahang Rai, partly in Nepali). To illustrate this, I include the original in the following quotations from the text.

> Wife-givers: *ca:wetum duŋwetum,*
> 'We have eaten, we have drunk,
>
> *chobasekha ne: poŋwasekha ne:, khamawa ne: chebewa ne: ca:wetuppho,*
> 'We have killed pigs, we have killed chickens, we have drunk beer, we have received money.'
>
> *tulo ko dã̐ri pani bhã̐cyo, pāthi ko biṭ pani phã̐ṭyo,*
> 'The scales are broken, the rim of the grain-basket is torn,'
>
> *... rīta ne: musucim, bhã̐ta ne: musuci-pho,*
> '... and they have brought all the gifts.'

During this consultation, the presence of the various kinship categories that make up the *māiti* side is important. They have to share the responsibility for the decision: clearly it is not only a matter of the woman's immediate family members, but of the larger circle of kin (and affines, the mother's brother), as well as the headman.

Eventually, after the wife-givers have come to the internal agreement that they are ready in principle to give the pledge, the wife-takers are put on a crucial test in order to see whether they are really trustworthy alliance partners. This is called *dakkhɨchu:kchu:k*, the 'Interrogation'. Now the wife-givers take the initiative in speaking and ask the wife-takers, also in a highly standardized manner, how they would act in certain crisis situations, when the honour of the bride – and thus that of her kin – is at stake.

First of all, the wife-givers, now for their part understating the matter, stress the modest qualities of their daughter. They say:

---

[4] F = father; FB = father's brother; MB = mother's brother; and FF = father's father.

Wife-givers: 'Our daughter does not know anything (*malesuppa mathapsuppa*),

she does not know to weave (*sigiwa*), she does not know to sew (*pariwa*),

she does not know to say "o my uncle", nor "o my aunt"' [= use the proper kin terms].

Then the wife-takers have to take all responsibility and say:

'We will take care of this, we will teach her and tell her, all the crafts (*sigiwa pariwa* M*).

... our daughter-in-law is clever, your daughter needs no teaching, rather she teaches us.'

In a similar way, more specific situations are evoked to test the commitment of the wife-takers. For example, the wife-givers ask what they would do in case their daughter is ill – will they bear all the expenses, hold healing rituals, even when it is costly? The wife-takers have to repeat – in similar wording – that they will do and pay whatever is necessary.

Likewise other eventualities are constructed: e.g. that of stealing ('If our daughter starts to steal, will you pay the fine, will you settle the matter?'), or the danger of sexual transgression ('If she is picking flowers, below the path, above the path, will you explain things to her?'), or the possibility of domestic quarrels ('If by any chance domestic quarrels should arise, will you follow her trace even up to her parent's house...?'), etc.

In all these cases the wife-takers must make it clear that they are now ready to take over all responsibilities for the behaviour of their daughter-in-law and will not put any blame on her kin-group. This promise on the part of the wife-takers is a crucial precondition for the final Pledge given by the wife-givers. Interestingly, at several points, the jural validity of these promises is stressed by evoking various witnesses:

Wife-givers: 'With the beer and money as witness (*khamawa sã̃ci chebewa sã̃ci*),

with the fish in the river as witness, with the birds from the high pastures as witness,

what the Ten Elders from the Ten Valleys speak today is the truth.'

Here it should be explained that before the Interrogation the wife-takers have to give beer, and the wife-givers give a coin of 50 Paisa (previously equivalent amounts) that are kept in the centre of the room during the ceremony. Eventually the climax of the speech exchange is reached. After evoking the various witnesses, the leading elder of the wife-givers declares:

> '(I declare) from this day, Pancami, the 27th of Baisākh in the year of 2042,

> (that) on the one side our third-eldest daughter Dilmaya, (on the other) our son-in-law Sancar Bahadur,

> (that) she breaks away from our bone and becomes part of his bone,

> two portions of meat are made into one portion, two containers of blood are made into one container.'

This clearly articulates the final dissociation of the woman from her natal group and her 'physical' integration into the husband's clan. The following section, like in the *bāgdatta*, specifies the legitimate sanctions in the case of adultery. First the area within which the customary law is valid is demarcated:

> *purbā Meci, paścim Paśupati, uttar Poptipopkhaŋ, dākhin Sãguri bhanjyaṅ.*
> 'In the East Mechi, in the West Pasupati, in the North Poptipopkhaŋ in the South Sãguri Bhanjyaṅ.'

> *eti cār kilā bhitra*
> 'Within these four posts'

Then the right for self-justice is given in the following words (abridged):

> *... hāmro juwāile helā hepi gari, sautale liyemā,*
> '... if our son-in-law insults her, and takes another wife,'

> *hāmro chorīko bārāne khurpā jāgyo. (...)*
> 'then our daughter's twelve-ānā sickle will be entitled to strike. (...)'

> *śrimati bāṭomuni bāṭomāthi lāgera, phul cũṛdo bhayo bhanne ra,*
> '(But) if his wife is walking below the path, above the path, and she is picking flowers,'

> *usko ḍhāl khãṛ jāgyo.*
> 'then his slashing scimitar is entitled to strike.'

Here the consequences of adultery are defined in symmetrical terms: if the husband takes another wife (without the consensus of his first wife), traditionally the woman may kill him with her female weapon. And likewise, if the wife makes off with another man, the cuckolded husband may legitimately seek violent revenge against his rival (and in earlier times, it is said, also his wife). This, of course, is no longer practiced. Now it is meant rather more metaphorically as a threat that is used to claim as much compensation as possible.

What emerges in this performance is that in spite of the lively 'as if' play-acting, emphasis is given to proper formulaic speech. These formula are marked by a parallelist structure. Often, especially in the climax sections, they are in Nepali – which links the speech to the larger world – or else they use ritual binomials. All in all, the usage of a formalised kind of language is already a step towards its 'inscription', it is similar to the use of a written text. As Ricoeur (1971: 534) observes, the authorship in written texts undergoes a modification:

> With written discourse, the author's intention and the meaning of the text cease to coincide. This dissociation of the verbal meaning of the text and the mental intention is what is really at stake in the inscription of discourse.

In a similar way, formulaic speech effects a shift in the authority of the speaker: it is no longer only the individual speaker who speaks but the Tradition. Thus, the highly formulaic speech that dominates the staged performance facilitates the recognition of the norms of ancestral Tradition.

5. In situ performance: A marriage without a groom

In the genre of ceremonial dialogues, which are closest to the ordinary language end of the ritual speech continuum, the process of contextualisation is of special importance. As we have seen, in the marriage dialogues a very crucial social transformation is at stake: the legitimisation of a marital union and the transfer of juridical authority from one clan to another. In spite of the numerous formulae which are used here, it is clear that the dialogues not only invoke the conditions of an ideal marriage (which, to be sure, is an important aspect) but are at the same time actual negotiations pertaining to a the specific, individual case, with all of its contingencies.

One case that I recorded was unique in that it took place without the groom – he had died unexpectedly (Gaenszle 2007). DB of the Ketara clan in

Tamku was working in India when he was killed in an accident. His wife, MD, who was in her late thirties, lived at her husband's place, but due to the husband's long absence and the fact that no children had been born, the marriage rites were not yet completed.[5] When MD learnt of her husband's death she decided to stay in Tamku, in her *ghar* (house of residence), and not to return to her *māiti*, i.e. her parents' place in Yamdang. In order to establish her continuing right to her husband's property, it was necessary to legitimise the union and make MD a full member of his clan. So a knowledgeable representative of her clan, MSR, was invited to perform the *dhito dhāraṇ,* the ceremonial dialogue that concludes the Big Wedding (see Gaenszle 2000: 178f). In fact, MSR was much more knowledgeable than his dialogue partners, because in Tamku few Mewahang speakers are left. So the whole exchange was rather one-sided.

It was not a big affair, simply something necessary to move on from. But the event was interesting, as the performers maintained a delicate balance between constructing the ritual context appropriate for such a wedding ceremony and at the same time adjusting their ritual speech to the particularities of the situation. The speaker of the bride's side began his part, in well-measured parallelist phrases, by directly referring to the tragic fate of the son-in-law, and he moved on to express his gratitude to the affines for taking good care of his clan-daughter, who 'continues to be around the ancestral hearth' of her deceased husband. In order to highlight the shift between more or less ordinary speech (which includes occasional binomials) and standard formulaic phrases, the latter are set in bold in the following extracts.

'So now our daughter Maili is left without our son-in-law,

she stayed with (the help of) the tools (*yaŋma kopbi yaŋma bethi*) of (you) *wacheŋ* people,

we are grateful to you! The *wacheŋ* people are mindful people (*nɨŋwami sanɨŋmi*). (....)

But our daughter is ignorant and untrained (*malesuppa mathapsuppa*).

---

[5] The capitalised abbreviations of this paragraph refer to individuals who would prefer not to be named.

We had thought that she would not be able to remain and stay in the house of her in-laws,

but now we find that she continues to be around your ancestral hearth (*situluŋ thuŋmaluŋ*).'

Reference to the particular situation is stressed through temporal deixis ('now'), proper names ('Maili', '*wacheŋ* people' [referring to a proto-clan]) and the extensive use of personal pronouns.

Likewise the wife-takers pointed to the unhappy circumstances, a time of crying and of inauspicious planetary constellations (*dasa graha*), while at the same time voicing their request and praising their affines as *maitirājā* ('wife-giver kings').

'We found that we have to put a request to our wife-giver kings,

 that we have to put a request for the ritual exchange (*riti bhā̃ta*).
 (...)

Who knows our planetary constellations (*dasa graha*)?

So his parents and his in-laws had to cry and grieve, o wife-giver kings!

Today we ask for the Concluding Rituals, give us the *dhito dhāraṇ*!'

After such contextualising phrases, the speakers gradually turned to the more formal part of the interaction. The wife-takers' side stated the request for the *dhito dhāraṇ*, and the wife-givers' representative eventually proceeded with the standard enquiry to test the wife-takers readiness to bear full responsibility for the woman. The climax of the event was the solemn declaration that the woman was now detached from her paternal 'bone' and had merged with that of her husband's clan, a formal act which is accompanied by the invocation of divine witnesses.

'Above in the sky the stars are hearing it,

and below the snake in the ground is hearing it (...).

Our ancestral beer and the Hunting Spirit are witnessing.'

After this, a meta-level discussion ensued, since in the normal case this section would be followed by the *cār kilā*, the empowerment to kill the spouse's adulterer, which is the dramatic climax in an ordinary *dhito dhāraṇ* (Gaenszle 2000: 175f, 179f). But since here there was no husband, it was decided that the section could be skipped.

This example illustrates how the 'text', i.e. the structure of standard phrases expected under normal circumstances, is adjusted to the specific context. The speakers explicitly refer to the unusual, sad situation. The crucial point of the event was the transaction between clans, not between individuals, and so it posed no problem to modify the ritual accordingly. In the course of this contextualisation, the particular context itself was redefined, and eventually a textual order was imposed through the use of formula. In other words, entextualisation (or inscription) occurred, which then led to the ritual transformation, the change of the woman's status.

Here this negotiation of context went smoothly, with no misunderstandings or friction. But I have also experienced (though not taped) one case where the dialogue turned into a passionate and hostile discussion, and came close to a breakdown.

6. Conclusion

It becomes clear that there is a fundamental difference between in vitro and in situ recordings.

The staged in vitro performance is more ordered and represents an ideal type. It shows how people think that the dialogue should proceed and how the ritual should be performed. It clearly brings out the standard formulas (phrases of formulaic character) that are expected to be used. Thus the speech forms can be seen as highly textualised. Here, the aspect of entextualisation (in Kuipers' sense) is particularly strong: ritual speech is used to express authority.

Though the actors in the staged performance tried to make it as 'live' as possible, the performance remains somewhat sterile: it lacks the contingencies of real life. But for the ethnographer, this makes it easier to bring out the 'model of the text.' What is eventually transcribed comes close to what the people themselves regard as the 'proper words.' Therefore, such a text produced by the researcher is likely to be accepted as 'standard.' But, of course, one has to be aware that this is only an ideal, an abstraction, which never occurs as such in practice. This is frequently ignored by the people once a standard has been established in written form, and so there is a danger of

'ritual standardisation', i.e. the conscious striving for fulfilling the ideal of written texts in ritual practice.

The in situ performance, to the contrary, is more vivid than the staged one as it is rooted in everyday life conditions. Emotions, tensions and interpersonal relations are expressed and influence the procedures of the ritual. It crucially includes indexical reference to the particular situation through the use of linguistic forms such as temporal and spatial deixis, pronouns, contextualisation cues, etc., which link the speech to the contingencies of the event. However, such performances are often incomplete and deviate from the ideal type, due to the exceptionality of the situation, or a deficiency of speaker's knowledge and competence. Whole sections may be omitted, and others added or elaborated upon as required by the context.

In conclusion, one can say that having both kinds of recording is in fact an ideal starting point for ethnographic textualising, because it allows for a comparison between ideal and practice. The in vitro performance is helpful for outlining the normative grid – the 'pure text' one might say – which in turn makes it easier to make out and judge the strategies of a live performance. If both are taken together (while keeping in mind their difference), the analysis facilitates a deeper understanding of what is going on. Therefore I would advise researchers in the field: do not hesitate to go for in vitro recordings, but be aware of their limits!

References

Finnegan, Ruth. 1977. *Oral poetry: Its nature, significance and social context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Finnegan, Ruth. 1992. *Oral traditions and the verbal arts. A guide to research practices*. London: Routledge.

Gaenszle, Martin. 2000. *Origins and migrations: Kinship, mythology and ethnic identity among the Mewahang Rai of East Nepal*. Kathmandu: Mandala Book Point & The Mountain Institute.

Gaenszle, Martin. 2002. *Ancestral voices: oral ritual texts and their social contexts among the Mewahang Rai in East Nepal*. Münster, Hamburg, London: LIT Verlag.

Gaenszle, Martin. 2007. The power of texts: Uses of contextualization and entextualization in Mewahang ritual speech. In Ulrich Demmer and Martin Gaenszle (eds.), *The power of discourse in ritual performance: rhetoric, poetics, transformations,* 100-120. Münster: LIT Verlag.

Gellner, David. 1992. *Monk, householder, and tantric priest. Newar Buddhism and its hierarchy of ritual*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hanks, William F. 1989. Text and textuality. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 18, 95-127.

Kuipers, Joel. 1990. *Power in performance. The creation of textual authority in Weyewa ritual speech*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Höfer, András. 1992. Six proposals for an 'Ethnography of the Performed Word': afterthoughts on reading Martin Gaenszle's review article on the Study of Oral Ritual Texts. *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research* 3, 17-22.

Mesthrie, Rajend, Joan Swann, Andrea Deumert & William L. Leap (eds.). 2009. *Introducing sociolinguistics*. 2nd edition. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Monier-Williams, Monier. 1899. *A Sanskrit English dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ong, Walter. 1982. *Orality and literacy. The technologizing of the word*. London and New York: Methuen.

Oppitz, Michael. 1991. *Onkels Tochter, keine sonst*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag.

Pollock, Sheldon. 2006. *The language of the gods in the world of men: Sanskrit, culture, and power in premodern India*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Ricoeur, Paul. 1971. The Model of the text: Meaningful action considered as a text. *Social Research* 38(3), 529-562.

Turner, Ralph Lilley. 1980. [1931] *A Comparative and etymological dictionary of the Nepali language*. New Delhi: Allied Publishers Private Limited.