

VARIATION IN ORAL NARRATIVE PERFORMANCE: A PACIFIC EXAMPLE

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Ever since the pioneering work of Milman Parry and Albert Lord on the role of orality in the composition of classical Greek and 20th century Serbo-Croatian oral narratives (Lord 1960, Parry 1930, 1932), it has been widely acknowledged that many of the features characterising such narratives can be linked to the constraints imposed by oral methods of composition. As a result, much of the scholarship on oral narrative style—especially that published up until the late 1980s—has tended to focus on the formal structure of the narrative itself—on rhyme and rhythm, on idiosyncrasies of syntax and grammar, on repeated idiomatic “formulae”—in order to show how these aid both performer and listener during any oral performance. Apart from examination of “themes”—lesser segments of the overall storyline that in their familiarity are also seen to assist composition during performance—the general plot and the contextualised meaning(s) of any narrative have tended to be seen as of lesser importance in shaping narrative style. In addition, the contribution of more informal elements of the performance—elements other than those involved in the formal structure or semantic content of the narrative itself—have also tended to be overlooked.

Yet, Parry’s and Lord’s work—and that of the “orality theorists” (as they are often called) in general—has been heavily criticised on a number of grounds. A key target has been their apparent assumption that oral performance is more about the seemingly mechanical transmission of pre-determined, learned idiom than it is about the creative artistry of poetry-making (see for example Calhoun 1935; Edwards 1986, 1988; Foley 1988, 1991). In particular, the inability of much orality theory to come to terms with nuance and complexity of meaning—a result of its view that words and phrases are chosen primarily because of their metrical convenience to the performer rather than because of the particular meanings that they might convey—has been heavily criticised. As Foley (1991: 7) put it,

Traditional [oral] elements reach out of the entire tradition, defined synchronically and diachronically, and they bear meanings as wide and deep as the tradition they encode. The ‘how’ of the traditional idiom... includes an extratextual dimension uniquely the domain of oral traditional art. This idiom is liberating rather than imprisoning, centrifugal rather than centripetal, explosively connotative rather than claustrophobically clichéd.

Pierre Bourdieu (among many others) pointed to the folly of viewing any social practice as involving a simple regurgitation (or “execution”, as he puts it) of any given text (Bourdieu 1977: 24). In a similar vein, much anthropological work has demonstrated that the meaning conveyed in any oral performance is rarely pre-determined or given in the way that many oral theorists suppose; oral performances are not “texts” to be read purely in terms of their semantic content.¹ Instead, we should view them as what Schieffelin (writing on the Kaluli *séance*, which makes extensive use of oral poetry and song) has termed “an emergent social construction”. He further insisted that “the work of a performance, what it does, and how it does it, can never be discovered only by examining the text, or the script, or the symbolic meanings embodied in the ritual alone” (1985: 721-22). Schieffelin stressed the additional role of the dialogic interaction between performer and audience in this regard, while Kapferer (1983) has focused more on the power inherent in the phenomenological or aesthetic elements of the performance itself. The critical role played by these and other informal performance elements in any oral performance is clear in much writing on the topic.² Such elements are not only frequently central to the work of the performance—including to the production of the meanings that it attempts to convey—but also help to create its distinctive aesthetic or style.

In this article I take up these points in exploring oral narrative performance in a Borneo Dayak community. In her introduction to a key collection on oral traditions found in the South Pacific, Ruth Finnegan points out that “we cannot just assume in advance that because one form has been labelled ‘oral’ or even ‘traditional oral’ that we already know all about its likely characteristics” (1995: 22; see also Finnegan 1977, 1988). Indeed, my article focuses on two distinct forms of epic that I recorded in this community in 1986, and asks how we might account for the variations between them. As we will see, while there are many similarities between these two narrative forms in terms of formal structure, there are also some differences. But, in addition, there are a number of critical differences between the informal performance elements of each, resulting in two highly contrastive performance styles. This contrast in style cannot be explained within a conventional Parry-Lord framework, not only because of the formal similarities between the two forms, but also because both kinds of performance must meet roughly the same performance demands.

Recent work on oral performance has shown that the style of any performance is linked as much to the development of particular meanings as it is to the demands of orality. For example, Steven Feld’s work on the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea has shown in marvellous detail how forms of song, including wailing, are intimately connected to their meaning and emotional content (Feld 1990, 1995), while Alan Rumsey’s work on the

metrical oral poetry found in the Ku Waru region of Papua New Guinea shows that metricality (as opposed to non-metricity) is linked to the value accorded in this culture to certain modes of personal interaction (Rumsey 2001). While there is no doubt that the orality theorists are correct to argue that the style of an oral performance is influenced by the constraints imposed by oral methods of composition, I suggest in what follows that many of the differences in style between the two Dayak epic forms are also linked to the different types of context in which they are performed and so to the different set of meanings that each is attempting to convey. In particular, they are linked to the promotion of two different—and competing—styles of masculinity in the community, and to the related differential evaluation as “true” or “fictional” of the two kinds of narrative themselves. However, crucially, the rather different meanings attached to the two kinds of performance cannot be read off automatically from the semantic content of the narrative alone (although this is clearly important), but themselves emerge, and are created, in the act of performance itself.

TWO TYPES OF NARRATIVE PERFORMANCE: *SENSANGAN* AND THE
CERITO NOSI

Gerai is a Dayak community of around 700 inhabitants located in the northern part of the Ketapang district (*kabupaten*) in the Indonesian province of West Borneo (Kalimantan Barat). Like other Borneo Dayak groups, Gerai people speak an Austronesian language, and they thus share certain linguistic and some cultural traits with peoples found throughout the Pacific, including in Melanesia and Polynesia (see Bellwood, Fox and Tryon 1995). In terms of the conventional distinction made between egalitarian and stratified Dayak societies, Gerai would be classified among the former because they have no formalised authority structure within the community; here there are no chiefs and no system of ranks.³ Like most other Borneo Dayak peoples, Gerai people were traditionally animist in their religious beliefs and in the mid-1980s, when I first spent time in the community, these animist beliefs still largely prevailed. However, since under Indonesia’s constitution animism is not considered a legitimate religion, Gerai people have been forced, since the 1950s, to convert (at least in name) to one of the world religions. As a consequence, most now describe themselves as Catholic, although the degree to which individuals adhere to Catholic doctrine varies markedly.⁴

Gerai people are largely subsistence rice cultivators, although some raise a little cash through such activities as producing rubber or working at the nearby timber camps. As for most Borneo Dayak peoples, kinship is cognatic in Gerai, and is not strongly emphasised as an organising principle. Here are found no descent groups such as clans and lineages, and not even any clear

conception of a kindred.⁵ The most important social unit is what I term the “rice group”: a small grouping (average 6.5 persons), ideally consisting of a stem family and usually (although not always) co-residing.⁶ Members produce rice on behalf of the group, share rights in the product and take responsibility for the wellbeing of one another. As I have described at length elsewhere (Helliwell 1995, 2001), the two chief activities around which the rice group coalesces are the production of rice and of children. These two activities are viewed by Gerai people as inseparable: the group produces rice in order to raise healthy children who will, in turn, produce the rice that will perpetuate the group once their parents are old and frail.

Gerai culture is rich in oral traditions and many different oral art forms are still practiced within the community, although the performance of some is now so rare that they are in danger of dying out. Gerai oral traditions display the two characteristics of Pacific oral traditions in general, as outlined by Finnegan (1995: 16-19). Firstly, there are a wide variety of modes of composition and performance found in the community. Thus during my periods of fieldwork I have recorded chants, spells and songs to enlist the assistance of friendly spirits and to repel harmful ones; a variety of tales both humorous and serious, narrated in prose for entertainment (although often with a clear moral attached); ritual hearth genealogies (also told in prose); songs of love, loss or the depiction of other profound human experience; and lengthy accounts of the exploits of culture-heroes, usually delivered in song. Secondly, in Gerai (as elsewhere in the Pacific), verbal texts seldom stand alone, but are invariably part of a wider communicative context involving song, dramatic acting out (especially during ritual), or other forms of bodily presentation and representation. In Gerai, bodily modes of delivery are a crucial part of most performances, and are used to convey much of the intended meaning.

Of all the oral performance forms found in Gerai, the one regarded as pre-eminent by Gerai people, because of both its beauty and its difficulty of performance, is the *sensangan*: the narration of a tale in slow poetic song with the performer accompanying himself on a small drum. In my experience, *sensangan* is invariably performed by a man, although Gerai people say that there is no reason why a woman could not perform it if she wished. A *sensangan* performance takes many hours to complete, moving through a number of episodes to arrive at the eventual happy ending that seems to be a requirement of Gerai story-telling. Since Parry and Lord’s focus on epic poetry, there have been many definitions of epic and *sensangan* accords with most of them. Thus *sensangan* constitute a corpus built around the exploits of a single hero (Honko 1998: 9), they are poems in “high style” (Lord 1960: 6), they are “heroic” (Lord 1960: 6) and, perhaps most importantly, they have the quality of “greatness” (Honko 1998: 9). As Honko put it: “Epics usually

rank very high among both literary and oral poetry genres. They are great narratives or superstories which excel in length, power of expression and significance of content over other narratives” (1998: 10).

This description fits Gerai *sensangan* perfectly. As we will see, *sensangan* also accord with Bakhtin’s (1981) view of epic as focused on an absolute past, as emanating from community (although not *national* community, as Bakhtin would have it) tradition as opposed to personal experience and as describing a world that stands “on an utterly different and inaccessible time-and-value plane” (Bakhtin 1981: 14) from the world of the performer and audience. The only definitions of epic that *sensangan* do not fit are those that emphasise metricality (see, for example, Tedlock 1983: 25).

Like most oral performers, the Gerai singer of *sensangan* relies heavily on formulaic phrases and recurring themes to keep the tale flowing. However, the metrical requirements of *sensangan* appear to be far less rigid than those of much oral poetry—for instance, the Greek Homeric and the Serbo-Croatian epics studied by both Parry and Lord (Parry 1930, 1932; Lord 1960) or the Ku Waru poems studied by Rumsey (2001, 2007). Thus a Gerai *sensangan* performer will frequently lengthen or shorten a word to make it fit more easily with the melody and vice-versa. In the absence of such a rigid metrical structure, Gerai *sensangan* performers make extensive use of grammar, syntax and vocabulary to maintain a sense of balance within the song; parataxis, and in particular parallelisms, occur constantly, while alliteration and assonance are also freely employed. This can clearly be seen in the following *sensangan* extract.

*Sedang des ari Koling turun,
Turun tangga ke temilayan.
Bercayo samo bulan,
Bercayo samo mata 'ari,
Ya-pun berkilau-kilau samo bintang.
Di tangkin podang panyang,
Luah-te dayung perawu,
Tajam-te buluh lana.
Di kepala-nya bulu burong burai,
Di jari itam, di pungong mirah.
Inei 'Bintang Tigo di langi',
Do sato tajaw kacow.
Awat mantau Koling di beroh,
Awat mantau Koling di tanah,
Koling yeng panci.
Nak bejodoh ken Koling.*

When the day was at the right point Koling descended (from the longhouse),
 He descended the entry ladder to the open space.
 Shining like the moon,
 Shining like the sun,
 Like that glistening like the stars.
 At his side hung his long sword,
 Wide like the paddle of a boat,
 Sharp like the quills of a porcupine.
 On his head were *burai*⁷ feathers,
 Black was on his hands,⁸ red was at his waist.⁹
 Grandmother Three Stars in the sky,¹⁰
 Had a *tajaw kacow*.¹¹
 She saw Koling below,¹²
 She saw Koling on the earth,
 Koling who was splendid.
 She wanted to consort with Koling.

Sensangan are always accounts of the Gerai culture-hero Koling. They are very similar in content to the Iban Keling corpus (Donald 1991; see also Munan 2005), and also resemble the well-known Bidayuh (Land Dayak) story of Kichapi (Geddes 1957). In terms of their themes and overall storylines, *sensangan* also resemble the stories of the hero Maui found throughout the South Pacific, and like Maui, Koling is both hero and trickster.¹³ The stories tell of Koling's battles with spirits and ogres as well as with heroes from the sky and other places, of his winning and/or rescuing young women (particularly the beautiful Imobonang, who becomes his wife at the end of many tales), and of the assistance given to him by his spirit-helpers and friends. Great emphasis is placed in the tales on Koling's courage and daring as well as on his martial prowess. Tales from this corpus are used to provide general and spontaneous community entertainment: they might be performed when large groups of people are gathered for ceremonial occasions, or to create a pleasant community diversion in the flickering lights of the longhouse night at the end of a hard day's work.

Sensangan are included within the broad Gerai category of *cerito* 'stories', but they are described as *cerito rayo* 'great stories'. As far as I can tell, within the variety of forms that are classified as 'stories', the epithet 'great' is reserved exclusively for the *sensangan* corpus, with one exception. The *cerito Nosi* 'Nosi story' is also described as 'great'.¹⁴ However, in contrast to *sensangan* the *cerito Nosi* accords with only some of the conventional definitions of epic: thus it focuses on a single hero, it is a poem in "high style", it is "heroic" and it has the quality of "greatness". But it does not constitute

a corpus, comprising instead a single tale with a lengthy (two- to three-hour) storyline. Nor, as we will see, does it focus on an absolute past or describe a world that is understood as inhabiting a different temporal and value plane from our own. Indeed, I will argue here that it is precisely from its description of a world understood as temporally connected to our own that the *cerito Nosi* gains much of its power. To designate it as not an epic on this basis seems to me to fall into spurious distinctions between backwards-focused tradition and forwards-focused modernity. Certainly, for Gerai people this is a great narrative, as great as any of those in the *sensangan* corpus.

The *cerito Nosi* uses very similar themes and formulae to those found in *sensangan* to communicate the various episodes and overall storyline to the audience. But unlike *sensangan*, which are sung very slowly to a drum accompaniment, the *cerito Nosi* is chanted very rapidly in a flat monotone, without accompaniment. One of its most distinctive features is the use of the nonsense word *konok*—sometimes with the emphasis participle *-neh* added to the end of it—to separate phrases and words, many of these formulaic. A sense of how this word is used can be gained from the following few lines taken from the tale:

Jedi mangka ya konok,
Dah mulah sensadai atap konok,
Berangkut boneh konok,
Berangkut joluw pakai: lau' rompah konok,
Dah nya konok sedang des nugal, nugal.
Dah nugal konok ya konok-neh padi konok,
Ya betapa konok di lem gua.
Betara konok di lem tanah,
Tiga ari tiga malam pengempat belantang.

So thus *konok*.
 After they had built a farm hut *konok*,
 They carried out rice seed *konok*.
 They carried out many things: meat vegetables *konok*,
 When already *konok* the time was right for planting (rice), they planted (rice).
 After they had planted (rice) *konok* like that *konok-neh* the rice,
 They made prestations (to the spirits) *konok* in the cave.
 They planted (rice seed) *konok* in the ground,
 Three days three nights on the fourth it began to sprout.

There is little attempt to fit the words to a metrical pattern. Instead each line is spoken at a rapid steady pace with a brief pause occurring at its end; since the lines are of different lengths, there is no regularity about the pauses.

As in the *sensangan* tales, also lacking a rigid metrical pattern, parallelism is extensively used to maintain balance, as are assonance and alliteration. It would seem that in the context of a rapid-fire delivery unbroken by deviation in tone or pitch, the use of the word *konok* helps to distinguish agents and activities from one another, so serving to maintain a clear narrative track and thereby aiding both delivery and receipt of the story-line. In the much slower *sensangan* corpus, the singer has more time to feel his way along the track of the story-line, and to pause or otherwise clearly mark significant points; the audience also has more time to take in the performance and to ponder at moments of confusion. Significantly, as we will see below, individual performances of the *cerito Nosi* appear to vary much less from one another than do individual performances of the same *sensangan*.

As with *sensangan*, I have only ever seen the *cerito Nosi* performed by a man. But in contrast to *sensangan*, Gerai people say that the *cerito Nosi* must be performed by a man. They say that it ‘wouldn’t feel right’ (*teraso nowe nyaman*) for it to be performed by a woman, a point to which I will return. In addition, while the performer of *sensangan* sits erect, interacting actively with his audience—meeting their eyes and moving his head to dramatise and emphasise particular points, even occasionally (where the storyline calls for it) getting up, drum in hand, to dance—the performer of the *cerito Nosi* goes to considerable lengths to efface himself: crouching in his place, eyes fixed on the floor several metres in front of him, body absent from the performance. He is, according to Akei’ Budi, whose version of the story I recorded in September 1986, ‘just a voice’ (*suaro ja*). Audience behaviour parallels these differences between the two performance styles. The *sensangan* audience is actively involved in constructing the narrative—expressing astonishment at Koling’s exploits, providing explanation and elaboration to one another regarding details of the plot, murmuring encouragement and appreciation to the performer, and sometimes even voicing disagreement with aspects of his telling. In contrast, the audience of the *cerito Nosi* sits quietly, with a respectful demeanour, focused to a much greater degree on the performer than on one another.

There are close similarities between the subject matter and story-line of *sensangan*, and those of the *cerito Nosi*, but also significant divergences. I have discussed these in relation to broader Indonesian conceptions of masculinity and processes of nation-building in an unpublished manuscript (Helliwell n.d.), but they are also pertinent to my concerns here. While *sensangan* detail the extraordinary exploits of a culture-hero, the *cerito Nosi* recounts the mundane activities of a much more prosaic Gerai man/hero named Layang Beu ‘Sloping Shoulders’ (an allusion to the [impressive] width of his shoulders). In the story Layang Beu makes a sword and scabbard, gets married, goes hunting, clears a rice field and grows rice. All of these activities

are outlined in extraordinary detail, emphasising the care and pride that Layang Beu invests in them. In this, his style contrasts markedly with that of his older brother Aning Kesuwi. Aning Kesuwi is hot-blooded and impatient. His sword and scabbard lack the beauty and functionality of Layang Beu's, and his neglect of his rice fields means that his crop is choked by weeds and eaten by mice. Most significantly, his warlike and aggressive attitude is depicted as being at the heart of his general incompetence; when he goes hunting, for instance, his constant talk of killing and of taking heads frightens his dogs to such a degree that one by one they leave him and he eventually returns home empty-handed.¹⁵ In fact, the *cerito Nosi* not only glorifies ordinary, everyday masculine activities, but also quite explicitly denigrates the headhunting and warlike exploits celebrated within the *sensangan* tales; the story is replete with sly allusions to famous, easily-recognisable events in those tales. Indeed, in many respects the *cerito Nosi* can be read as a subversive commentary on the entire *sensangan* corpus.

DIFFERENT CONTEXTS, DIFFERENT ROLES

The question, then, has to do with the styles of these two types of performance: how do we explain the differences between them? Both convey plots of similar complexity, make use of almost identical formulae and are roughly the same length; with some minor variation, both use the same vocabulary, grammar and syntax.¹⁶ Both are also delivered in the same kind of venue (usually a longhouse apartment or freestanding village dwelling) to roughly the same sized audience (usually around 10 to 25 people) and thus must meet approximately the same performance demands. In formal terms, then, they are very similar. The most significant formal difference between them is that of the rapid-fire delivery—incorporating the use of the word *konok*—of the *cerito Nosi* and the much slower delivery of *sensangan*. Essentially, they work to different rhythms. Yet, in spite of these formal similarities, their performance styles are very different. Since their performances must meet similar performance demands, it is difficult to explain this difference in style in terms of the Parry-Lord hypothesis, that is, in terms of the demands of orality (although orality is undoubtedly a crucial influence on the style of each).

When I asked Gerai people why the two styles were so different, they explained that the two genres fulfilled different functions. The greatness of the *cerito Nosi*, they said, lies in the lessons that it conveys: it is a text that 'teaches' (*ngajar*). It thus contrasts profoundly with the *sensangan* narratives, whose greatness lies in their intrinsic beauty, but which are 'just for play' (*usi ja*).

A distinction between what have been called true or historical accounts, on the one hand, and more fictionalised accounts, on the other, is found throughout the Pacific region: for example, the distinction between *tutui teteek*

and *bini* in Roti (Fox 1979), between *tala* and *kakai* in Tokelau (Huntsman 1995), and between *temani* and *kange* in the Ku Waru region of Papua New Guinea (Rumsey 2001). We can see the Gerai distinction between the *cerito Nosi* and *sensangan* as mirroring this. While Gerai people say that both the *cerito Nosi* and *sensangan* are ‘true’ (*bonar*) accounts, in that both are said to refer to actual events from the past, they identify the events of the former with the very recent past—an era that is seen as being, in some sense, continuous with the here-and-now—and those of the latter with a more remote, speculative history ‘when we were not yet as we are now’ (*diret bolum tokoh tuam*) (see Rumsey 2001: 200). Although (as with Ku Waru *temani* and *kange*) the difference here does not directly equate with the Western distinction between fact and fiction (Rumsey 2001: 200), it nevertheless reflects, in very general terms, the broader regional distinction between true and more fictionalised accounts. Differences in the two performance styles are closely linked to this distinction.

In order to understand these differences, we need to be aware of the different contexts in which the two narratives are performed. Unlike the Koling *sensangan* corpus, the *cerito Nosi* is not a tale that may be told at any time. Rather, its telling is restricted to the final night of a *sabat* or major wedding ceremony.¹⁷ One of the key elements of the *sabat* ceremony is the handing-over by the husband to the wife of the *buis*—a very substantial body of goods including gold, antique jars, pigs and brass gongs.¹⁸ Gerai people say that in the past the husband presented his wife with a freshly-taken human head as part of the ceremony and the *buis* has come to substitute for this since the banning of headhunting by the Dutch. In either case, in handing over the appropriate prestation, the husband marks himself as a *laki nar* ‘true man’, as a man of higher standing within the community whose voice is listened to and respected on any public occasion. The *cerito Nosi* is told during the *sabat* ceremony, immediately after the *buis* has been counted out and handed over. It is told in the longhouse apartment or house of the new wife’s natal household, and so it is members of this group who form the core around which many others gather to listen. Since the presentation of the *buis* highlights the men’s work that the husband has performed and continues to perform for his wife and their rice group during their marriage—work that complements the women’s work carried out by his wife—it is not surprising that the *cerito Nosi* is most essentially one about masculinity and men’s roles in contemporary Gerai.

Significantly, the hero of the *sensangan* corpus and the ‘true man’ idealised in the *cerito Nosi* are very different characters. While Koling spends much of his time engaged in martial activities and adventures of one kind or another, Layang Beu spends most of his performing the mundane Gerai masculine

activities of rice-farming and hunting for food. While Koling is aggressive and passionate, Layang Beu is steady and reasonable. We see at play here two competing versions of manhood, reflecting the complexity of images of masculinity found not simply in Gerai or Borneo more generally, but throughout the broader Pacific region.¹⁹ I have argued elsewhere (Helliwell 1994) that in spite of the tendency among anthropologists of Borneo to emphasise the heroic model of masculinity found in Dayak societies at the expense of the more domestic model that invariably exists alongside it, in many of those societies masculinity has always been predicated at least as much—and often more—on a man’s proficiency at rice-farming as on his abilities at headhunting and warfare. In recent times, Christianisation and (in Indonesian Borneo) exposure to the Indonesian state gender ideology of *Bapakism*²⁰ have led to an increase in the legitimacy accorded to the domestic model and a corresponding decline in the importance of the heroic one. As a consequence, the model of masculinity celebrated in the *cerito Nosi* is today seen by Gerai people as more ‘appropriate’ or ‘correct’ (*sedang*) for the contemporary Gerai man than that celebrated in the *sensangan* corpus.

The identification of the *cerito Nosi* with the very recent past—one continuous with the present—while *sensangan* are identified with a more remote past, then, reflects the contemporary Gerai view that, of the two, the *cerito Nosi* presents the truth of what Gerai men are and have been in living memory, while *sensangan* present a more fictionalised version. This is indexed in Gerai people’s frequent iteration that Layang Beu is ‘just like us’ (*tokoh diret*), in contrast to Koling, who is ‘different from us’ (*lain dari diret*). With this in mind, we can begin to make sense of many of the stylistic differences between the two genres.

THE ROLE OF INFORMAL PERFORMANCE ELEMENTS

Most of the differences between *sensangan* and the *cerito Nosi* outlined earlier are what we might call informal ones—that is, differences in elements other than those involved in the formal structure or semantic content of the narrative itself. As already noted, these kinds of differences tend to have been overlooked by orality theorists, but they are central to both the emergence of the different meanings attached to performances of *sensangan* and the *cerito Nosi*, and to the creation of their different styles.

In particular, in a performance of *sensangan*, the creative role of the performer—as demonstrated through the particular intonations used at different places, the lengthening of certain syllables and shortening of others, the raising and lowering of pitch and volume, movements of the head and body, use of the eyes and facial expressions, all of which serve to convey specific emotions and moral stances—is apparent to everyone, and is indeed

regarded as a vital part of the performance. In a performance of the *cerito Nosi*, on the other hand, the role of the performer is far less obvious: although he recreates and transforms the tale, he does not obviously dramatise it and in so doing explicitly impose his own interpretation between the bare storyline and the audience. In addition, the high degree of interaction between performer and audience that occurs in a *sensangan* performance increases the potential for creative license, while the lack of audience participation in a performance of the *cerito Nosi* has the reverse effect.

As a consequence, *sensangan* performances are subject to considerable variation, while performances of the *cerito Nosi* tend to be very similar to one another. This applies not only to the individual style of the performance itself, and the inclusion of non-narrative elements such as songs, dances or ritual chants, but also to the plot. The latter can vary significantly from one telling to another of the same *sensangan* story. By contrast, the three versions of the *cerito Nosi* that I have recorded (by two different performers) are extraordinarily similar in their plot detail. The Gerai storytellers to whom I spoke confirmed this point. One (who performed both *sensangan* and the *cerito Nosi*) explained that both performer and audience always ‘already knew’ (*dah tau*) the *cerito Nosi* plot, while the plot of any *sensangan* was more ‘open’ (*dikoba*). Following Bauman and Briggs (1990) we might describe *sensangan* as always contextualised, in contrast to the partially “entextualised” character of the *cerito Nosi*. That is, the *cerito Nosi* has, in certain respects, taken on the form of a text—an entity independent of the social contexts in which it is produced and performed—that is replicated relatively unchanged from one performance to another.

Kuipers (1990) and Keane (1995) have both demonstrated that entextualisation may enhance the authority of certain narratives, and add to their apparent “truthfulness”. This appears to be the case with the *cerito Nosi*. Thus it is significant that Gerai people describe the *cerito Nosi* as one that ‘teaches’, in contrast to *sensangan* which are ‘just for play’ since, in the Gerai context, the term ‘teach’ (*ngajar*) suggests both the truth of what is being taught, and the authority of the teacher. ‘Teaching’ traditionally refers to the imparting of wisdom, advice and even direction from members of a senior generation to those of a junior one, and its overtones of authority and credibility have been reinforced by the introduction of state-sponsored schooling in Gerai and surrounding villages in recent years. To describe the *cerito Nosi* as one that ‘teaches’ is thus to mark it as both authoritative and true. This is underscored by the respectful behaviour of both performer and audience during its performance. A performance of *sensangan*, on the other hand, does not carry the same weight: its aim is simply to entertain.

A related informal contrast between the two types of performance further underlines this difference in the credibility and authority of each. Unlike many peoples found around them (for example, Rotinese, Javanese, Balinese) and elsewhere in the Pacific (for example, Tongans, Māori), Gerai people do not locate their true stories within a genealogical history. Indeed, they are very little interested in personal genealogies, a fact that is almost certainly linked to the egalitarian characteristics of their culture (Helliwell 2012). In this respect, their stories resemble those of some other, more egalitarian, Pacific peoples (for example, Tokelauans [see Huntsman 1995]). However, many of their stories are firmly located in place, most notably their *cerito keturunan dapur* (hearth descent stories), stories that trace the genealogies of particular ritual hearths.²¹ Fox (1979) and Huntsman (1995) have shown how the veracity of true, as opposed to more fictionalised, oral accounts on Roti and Tokelau respectively is established through the fixing of the storyline in place. Something very similar occurs in Gerai. Thus, while *sensangan* are set in some general sense in and around Gerai—we know that Koling is a Gerai man, and there are occasional references in the stories to his visiting or passing nearby landmarks—the *place* of Gerai is almost entirely absent from the stories: they are set much more in a remote, fictionalised Gerai-like world, than they are in the landscape of Gerai itself. The *cerito Nosi*, on the other hand, is firmly grounded in the *place* of Gerai and the surrounding countryside: we know exactly where Layang Beu lived, where he had his bellows, where he made his rice field, where he went hunting, and so on. This contrast is clear in the following two extracts.

Sensangan extract

*Di sedang des ari Koling turun,
Turun tangga ke temilayan.
Nak bejalan ke tanah jewo,
Nak bejalan ke ruing jolang,
Nyuwe Koling turun beburu.
Kulu ke Sungai Batu,
Utan beluka sagam.
Kiliye ke Sungai Munteh,
Munteh modoa timuw.
Ke kanan ke Sungai Danan,
Pohon durien bosai-pun.
Kiba ke Sungai Pusat,
Beyo tuo ninggal.*

So when the day was at the right point Koling descended (from the longhouse),
 He descended the entry ladder to the open space.
 He wanted to travel to a place far away,
 He wanted to travel to deep forest,
 That's how it was Koling descended to go pig hunting.
 Upstream to Stone River,
 Where the forest is wild and dark.
 Downstream to Bamboo River,
 Where the young bamboos sprout.
 To the right to Rattan River,
 Where is the massive durian tree.
 To the left to Pusat²² River,
 Where the old crocodile lives.

The storyline continues from here to describe how Koling encounters a large and dangerous spirit and enters into battle with it. This is followed by various other exploits. Further on we get the sense of him returning to his longhouse (implicitly one of the longhouses of Gerai), although this is never spelled out.

cerito Nosi extract

*Dah tanpa' konok turun konok,
 Turun konok-neh ke temelayan konok.
 Dah datang ke temelayan konok-neh ke jurong konok,
 Dah ke jurong konok lalu ke tepiyan konok.
 Nyemorong tepiyan.
 Kulu konok ke Balut konok,
 Dah datang ke Balut konok-neh ke Tumilong,
 Dah datang ke Tumilong konok ke Gunong Timor konok.
 Dekat Gunong Timor;
 Dah rima konok ruing jolang konok.
 Ke utan lulai jewo konok,
 Riaw asu nyala' konok.
 Bunuh buru konok-neh.
 'Kita pulang-am. Tu-am konok digoga kita' konok-neh.
 Jedi pulang ke Gerai konok,
 Detang ke tepiyan konok.
 Dironam konok dah nya konok-neh.*

When it was dawn *konok* they descended (from the longhouse) *konok*,
 They descended *konok-neh* to the open space *konok*.
 They passed through the open space *konok-neh*, to the rice storage hut *konok*,

They passed by the rice storage hut *konok* to the home stream *konok*.
 They waded across the home stream.
 They went upriver *konok* to Balut²³ *konok*,
 Past Balut *konok-neh* to Tumilong,²⁴
 Past Tumilong *konok* to East Mountain²⁵ *konok*.
 Close to East Mountain,
 When they had reached primary forest *konok* deep forest *konok*.
 In the jungle far away *konok*,
 There came the sound of their dogs barking *konok*.
 They killed the pig *konok-neh*.
 ‘Now we’ll go home. This is what we were looking for’ *konok-neh*.
 So they went home to Gerai *konok*,
 They came to the home stream *konok*.
 They immersed (the pig) *konok* there *konok-neh*.

None of the places named in the *sensangan* extract—Stony River (*Sungai Batu*), Bamboo River (*Sungai Munteh*) and so on—exist in the actual countryside around Gerai, but all are well-known locations in myth. This is true also of the various figures mentioned in the extract: the massive durian tree, the old crocodile and so on. In calling up these places and figures the storyteller is explicitly referencing the semi-fictionalised mythical world that existed ‘when we were not yet as we are now’. By contrast, the *cerito Nosi* extract is profoundly grounded in the contemporary *place* of Gerai. It starts very explicitly in the village of Gerai itself, describing in detail Layang Beu’s movements in leaving the village. From there we follow him (and his uncle) along a well-known path, and one that is frequently trodden by contemporary Gerai men in search of game and other produce: from Gerai to Balut to Tumilong to the area around East Mountain. The pig is killed and immediately brought back to Gerai to be submerged in the home stream (before being gutted and cut up). In consequence, *cerito Nosi*’s storyline is pervaded with a sense of immediacy, of the here-and-now; its protagonists appear as people ‘just like us’ (*tokoh diret*) in the words of an audience member. *Sensangan* storylines, on the other hand, seem to relate to a world far removed from that in which the contemporary man of Gerai must make his way.

A further contrast between the two types of performance that is relevant here concerns the role of music. *Sensangan* are sung, in contrast to the *cerito Nosi*, which contains little obvious musicality. A number of thinkers have pointed out that music has the capacity to draw us into itself; as Kapferer puts it “music demands the living of the reality it creates” (1983: 187, see also Schieffelin 1985: 713-15). Certainly, during a *sensangan* performance the music transports the audience into Koling’s world in a way that simple

narration cannot do; this becomes especially clear when one compares *sensangan* performances with the more prosaic telling of tales about Koling that often takes place in the evening, and that lacks any musical component. The absence of song, drum or other performance elements that marks a performance of the *cerito Nosi* has almost the reverse effect; there is little attempt here to rouse the imagination of the audience or to transport it into a different world. Instead, the monotonal chant used by the performer directs attention almost exclusively onto the storyline itself, and underlines its import. The behaviour/demeanour of the audience reinforces this sense of the gravity of the storyline, a sense that does not inhere to a *sensangan* performance (where I have known a performer to change storyline midstream).

Because of the authority invested in the *Nosi* “text”, only community members with sufficient standing are seen as able to perform it. This is undoubtedly the reason why people say that it ‘wouldn’t feel right’ for a woman to perform the story; as I have noted elsewhere, in Gerai women have lower status and less authority than men (Helliwell 2000b: 798-99). Of those men with the appropriate standing to perform the story, very few possess the requisite performance skills; consequently, in the mid-1980s there were only two men in Gerai able to perform it. By comparison, there are no restrictions placed on who should and should not perform *sensangan*, and during my times in the community I have recorded five different *sensangan* performers (although one of these was from a different, though neighbouring, village). Similarly, there are no restrictions placed on when and where *sensangan* may be performed, while the *cerito Nosi* is limited to a specific ritual moment and place. This all feeds into the greater sense of seriousness and import that surrounds a performance of the *cerito Nosi* in comparison with one of *sensangan*.

Much of the difference described here between the two performance styles is encapsulated in Akei’ Budi’s comment, noted earlier, that the teller of the *cerito Nosi* is ‘just a voice’. In order to understand this comment we need to note that in Gerai sound is identified with sociality and relatedness; to speak of someone as being ‘clever/good at hearing’ (*panai ningo*) can be read as much as a comment on the strength of his or her connection with others as one on the keenness of his or her auditory sense.²⁶ Partly for this reason, in the Gerai sensorium hearing is accorded a higher value—and is more strongly associated with what is true or real—than other senses such as sight or smell.²⁷ Sight, in particular, is understood as potentially misleading or deceptive, in a way that hearing is not. To describe the performer of the *cerito Nosi*, then, as ‘just a voice’, is to highlight his role as a teller of what is true or real; what he says is uncluttered by potentially deceptive additional performance elements. His withdrawn posture and bodily effacement, as

well as the quiet, respectful demeanour of his audience, all underscore this perception of the narrative during the act of performance.

The key point here is that a *sensangan* performance actively works to engage its audience in the evocation of a semi-fictionalised world and, in the process, to excite, titillate and transport it. As a result, *sensangan* performances are most usually noisy and even rambunctious affairs. Both audience and performer are aware that what they are producing is semi-fantasy or, at the very least, a description of events that happened so long ago that they have little bearing on life in contemporary Gerai. A performance of the *cerito Nosi*, by contrast, positively discourages audience engagement; all performance elements underscore the status of the narrative itself as authoritative and true. Both audience and performer treat the performance as almost a recitation of a true historical sequence of events that have great import for contemporary Gerai life. In this way the *cerito Nosi* is able to operate as a wry meta-narrative on the *sensangan* corpus, reinforcing the appropriateness or correctness of a very different image of masculinity for contemporary Gerai men from that which dominates the *sensangan* tales.

* * *

Parry and Lord—and the orality theorists more generally—were undoubtedly correct to argue that the style of any narrative performance is influenced by the constraints imposed by oral methods of composition. However, it is a mistake to go beyond this and attempt to explain the style of any oral performance exclusively—or even primarily—in terms of the simple fact of its orality. As the contrast between the Gerai *sensangan* corpus and the *cerito Nosi* makes clear, the factors shaping any narrative performance are many and varied and, indeed, the meanings attached to any particular oral performance can themselves play a crucial role in shaping its style. This becomes particularly clear when we move beyond the orality theorists' fixation on the formal components of any performance, and consider also more informal ones.

While in certain respects the content of the *sensangan* corpus and the *cerito Nosi* are very similar—both focus on the exploits of a hero who lives in the same Borneo jungles, both involve lengthy descriptions of masculine activities, both make use of almost identical formulae and themes—the role of each and the meanings that Gerai people read into their respective performances, are very different. The differences in style of each type of performance are linked to these differences in role and in the meanings that each is intended to convey. *Sensangan* narratives set out to transport the audience to a marvellous world, far removed from the everyday one. Koling is, in every sense, a heroic figure, admired for his superhuman acts of bravery,

aggression and cunning, and therefore in no sense one of us. The *cerito Nosi*, on the other hand, is firmly fixed in the place and activities of Gerai. In explicit contrast to Koling, Layang Beu is a man of the here-and-now. While the performer of *sensangan*, then, seeks to entertain his audience—to excite and even titillate them—the performer of the *cerito Nosi* seeks to do almost the opposite: to downplay any suggestion of fantasy and to convey instead a sense of bald truth. And the truth that he wishes to impart is that Layang Beu, not Koling—the steady family man, rather than the hero—exemplifies what the contemporary Gerai man should be.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Kapferer 1983, Schieffelin 1985, Abu-Lughod 1986, Herzfeld 1996.
2. See, for example, Finnegan 1995: 17-19 on the crucial role of these informal elements in story-telling throughout the Pacific.
3. But see Helliwell 1995 on the hierarchy that nevertheless exists in Gerai, and the consequent inappropriateness of the stratified/egalitarian divide for describing Dayak societies.
4. Catholic missionaries—originally Dutch, later from other parts of the Indonesian archipelago—have been active in this region since the 1920s, and since the 1960s a significant number of Gerai teenagers have attended Catholic secondary school in Ketapang (several days travel from Gerai on the coast), staying in dormitories run by Catholic nuns and brothers while doing so. Protestant missionaries—from the fundamentalist New Tribes Missions—have also been active in this area since the late 1970s, and a small minority of Gerai inhabitants have converted to Protestantism (see Helliwell 2001: 29-31). However, even in the 21st century, Gerai people continue to hold to many of their animist traditions.
5. A number of Borneo ethnographers have pointed out that Freeman's (1961) account of the importance of kindred in Iban society does not hold true for many other Borneo Dayak peoples. See for example, King 1976, 1991; Rousseau 1990: 100.
6. A rice group can (and occasionally does) spread over more than one household. However, members of any one household always belong to the same rice group.
7. The *burai* is a mythical bird; it features frequently in tales about Koling.
8. In other words, he had black tattoos on the backs of his hands, indicating particular warrior status.
9. In other words, he was wearing a red loincloth, a mark of going to battle.
10. 'Grandmother Three Stars' is the spirit believed to live in the star constellation of Orion's belt.
11. A *tajaw kacow* is a very tall Chinese ceramic jar.
12. In other words, she looked down through the *tajaw kacow* and saw Koling below.

13. Knappert (1992: 185) describes Maui as ‘the great Polynesian Ulysses’, and this describes Koling equally well. Westervelt (1910: 185) notes that Maui legends are found right throughout Polynesia and also in Melanesia (see Luomalu 1949). For Māori examples (where he is called ‘Maui tikitiki a Taranga’), see Alpers 1964: 28-70.
14. The word ‘*Nosi*’ appears to have no meaning in contemporary Gerai other than as the name of this story. The word does not appear in the story and, in spite of repeated questioning, no-one has been able to explain to me why the story has this name. I can only presume that at some point in the past ‘*Nosi*’ had a meaning that is now defunct.
15. In certain respects the story resembles the humorous Apa’ Alui tales found in Gerai as well as among the Iban (see Sather 1981, 1984 for Saribas Iban versions), since Apa’ Alui’s false bravado is often depicted, at least in Gerai, as the source of his problems. However, it is important to note that Gerai people do not regard the *cerito Nosi* as humorous: it is an epic in every sense of the word.
16. In both cases the vocabulary, grammar and syntax were close enough to those of the everyday Gerai language for me, as a reasonably proficient (although by no means perfect) speaker of that language, to understand and be able to translate—with a little help—the narrative “text” I had recorded.
17. See Helliwell 1994, 2000a for descriptions of the *sabat* ceremony. After a couple *sabat*, they may not divorce and must be buried in a common grave.
18. See Helliwell 2000a for a discussion of why the terms “payment”, “bridewealth” and “dowry” are all misleading as descriptors of the *buis*.
19. See, for example, Keesing (1985) on Malaita (Solomon Islands), Tengan (2008) on Hawai’i, Hokowhitu (2008) on Māori, Jolly (2008) on Oceania in general, Spiller (2010) on Sundanese (Java) and van Wichelen (2009) and Nilan (2009) on Indonesia in general.
20. *Bapakism* ‘fatherism’ promotes a view of the ideal man as a married father, head of his family and steady breadwinner for that family (see for example van Wichelen 2009 and Nilan 2009).
21. As I have noted elsewhere (Helliwell 2012), while Gerai people downplay the importance of personal genealogies, ritual hearth genealogies are crucial to social order in the community.
22. A specific variety of bamboo, used for fine weaving.
23. Balut is a small community around 2 km upriver from Gerai.
24. Tumilong is an area where a small community once existed, around 5 km upriver from Gerai.
25. East Mountain is a tallish peak around 6-7 km upriver from Gerai.
26. See Helliwell 1996 on the crucial role of sound in the creation of sociality and community across different apartments within the Gerai longhouse.
27. Gerai is not alone in this respect. Other cultures that appear to value hearing above other senses include Kaluli (Feld 1990, 1996), Inca (Classen 1993) and Kalapalo (Basso 1985).

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ABSTRACT

As a result of the work of Parry and Lord, oral narrative style has often been explained in terms of the constraints imposed by oral methods of composition, with both the meanings of the narrative and the informal elements of performance tending to be overlooked. This paper explores oral narrative performance in the Borneo Dayak community of Gerai to argue that meaning and informal performance elements can be key to narrative style. Two types of 'great' narrative are found in Gerai, and they have highly contrastive performance styles. The differences in style are linked to the promotion of two different—and competing—styles of masculinity in the community, a point that becomes clear only when we consider informal performance elements.

Keywords: oral narrative, oral performance, Borneo Dayak, masculinity

