CHAPTER ONE

TEXTUAL CRITICISM AND MNEMONIC TEXTS

Textual criticism has been defined as “the systematic and critical examination of textual material, which most often exists in the form of handwritten manuscripts [...] in order to establish the form of the text which is as close as possible to the original.” 1

This definition of textual criticism is clearly based on the assumption that texts are written, and further, that an “original” text was composed at one specific point in time. Ancient Indian texts were not, however, originally written documents. The texts of ancient India were transmitted orally. Textual criticism becomes something entirely different when applied to an oral tradition, although Indological scholarship has not always recognized this crucial fact. Instead, many Indologists have turned to the text-critical models developed by scholars of Greek and Latin when studying Sanskrit texts.

The critical study of ancient written texts often invokes a genealogical model: There must have existed an original text, from which all extant manuscripts are thought to be derived, often through a series of other manuscripts that may or may not have been preserved. A scholar will gather all available manuscripts, and the manuscripts are then compared to each other in order to establish the genealogical relationship between them. This relationship can be illustrated in the form of a stemma, a genealogical tree. The scholar will then attempt to reconstruct an archetype, a theoretical state of text from which all the extant manuscripts could have been derived. The archetype may not be identical to the original text, but represents the best text one can arrive at by means of existing manuscripts. The text-critical scholar will then use his or her analytical skills to determine if any parts of the text are later interpolations or additions.

An oral text, on the other hand, cannot be said to have an “original” form. Oral texts are often built up around a central story line and a set of formulaic phrases, and are in some sense created anew every time.

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1 Haugen and Thomassen 1990: 128.
they are recited. As scholars of oral epics from various cultures have demonstrated, oral texts like the *Mahābhārata* or the Homeric epics are not the products of a single author’s imagination. Rather, these texts are more akin to folk tales and folk songs, in that they are the product of a collective creative imagination and have evolved over centuries. Each person reciting the text may present a different version. Each version is what John Miles Foley has called “only one possible recension of a multiform”. It is meaningless to search for the “original” *Mahābhārata*, the original *Odyssey*, or the original fairy tale of Cinderella. An oral text may of course over time assume a fixed form and eventually be transmitted in writing. A text-critical scholar analyzing a text with a long oral history must, however, always bear in mind that this text is essentially different from a written text, even if it currently exists in a written form.

The earliest Sanskrit literature cannot, however, be adequately described as oral literature in the same sense as the *Mahābhārata* or the Homeric poems. The Vedas and the Upaniṣads were transmitted orally, but unlike the oral epics, the texts were transmitted in a fixed form. A highly developed mnemonic culture existed in ancient India, and students were expected to memorize, with perfect accuracy, the texts recited by their teachers. Sophisticated mnemonic techniques were developed to ensure that the transmission was flawless. Like the earliest Vedic texts, the Upaniṣads were committed to memory and recited from memory. Although the transmission of the Upaniṣads was not as strictly codified as that of the Vedas, it would still be misleading to classify the Upaniṣads as “oral literature” in the sense this term is most often used to refer to oral epics or folktales. A better designation for the earliest Indian texts would be mnemonic literature. Mnemonic literature is transmitted orally, like oral texts, but in a fixed form somewhat akin to written literature. Coburn refers to Indian “verbal material that is highly “crystallized,” i.e., quite specific, boundaried…”, a description that fits the Upaniṣads rather well.

The distinction proposed here between oral and mnemonic texts corresponds in many ways to the indigenous Indian distinction between *śruti* and *smṛti*, texts that are “heard” and texts that are “remembered”.

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2 Foley 1984: 81.
3 Coburn 1984: 438.