JOEL M. HALPERN and BARBARA KEREWSKY-HALPERN (Amherst, Mass., U.S.A.)
JOHN MILES FOLEY (Columbia, Mo., U.S.A.)

Oral Genealogies and Official Records: A Comparative Approach Using Serbian Data*

How do individuals structure recall of their collective pasts? Is the transmitted information affected by the form of recall? How do the values of the narrator condition the data being presented? Does oral recall match archival and other written records? To what extent are the attempts of the field investigator limited by the communicative competence and reference frame of the informant?

The following discussion, integrated from three academic perspectives, seeks to look at these questions and to suggest ways in which the relationships between traditional oral recall and written records may be reviewed. Anthropological fieldwork has tended to rely on key informants for a significant portion of socio-cultural data collected. It is considered good practice to cross-check accounts, where possible, with a number of informants and to augment and corroborate oral recollections with published and archival sources if available.

Given the importance of such field methodology, adequate attention has not been paid to the ways in which informants structure matters of importance to them (or of interest to the investigator)—national and regional history, customary practices, genealogical information, and other data. This concern is particularly pertinent with regard to genealogical data which have fig-

*This research was made possible by grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Science Foundation, the National Academy of Sciences, the American Philosophical Society, and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. An earlier version of this article appeared as "Traditional Recall and Family Histories," in B. K. Halpern and J. M. Halpern, eds., Selected Papers on a Serbian Village: Social Structure as Reflected by History, Demography and Oral Tradition, Research Report No. 17 (Amherst: Dept. of Anthropology, Univ. of Massachusetts, 1977), pp. 165-98. Some of the themes of this article were presented at the World Conference on Records, Salt Lake City, August 1980. The field research was carried out in 1975 and 1978 under the auspices of an exchange agreement between the Serbian Academy of Sciences, Belgrade, the Council of Yugoslav Academies, and the National Academy of Sciences, Washington, D.C.
ured so importantly in social anthropological research. It is vital as well to the
growing field of historical demography in which demographers, social histori-
ans, and anthropologists have begun to evidence much interest.

The matter is not one of merely checking the accuracy of an informant's
recall against a census, vital record, or other document, for this would bring
into question an underlying assumption that it is the written record which is
assumed to be the more "accurate," that is, more complete. Rather, by using
both types of sources and a diversity of informants and records, one can then
utilize the information pools in a mutually illuminating fashion.

Realistically, however, one does not too often encounter the ideal situa-
tion of a rich oral tradition coexisting with extensive documentation.
Northern Europe, especially Scandinavia (and also to a considerable extent
New England), has preserved abundant demographic and genealogical records;
in these areas there has long been interest in such topics in an applied way,
particularly by individuals wishing to trace their own ancestries. Yet this very
notion of reconstruction by means of written records, and the compilation of
written genealogies from such records, is a manifestation of the absence of a
living oral tradition such as exists in parts of the Balkans, Africa, and else-
where. On the other hand, in areas of the world where anthropologists have
done extensive studies of lineages and descent groups, as for example in parts
of Africa, there has generally been a lack of census and vital records, particu-
larly for the period before World War II and especially prior to the twentieth
century.

The Balkans represent perhaps an intermediate position. There exist some
records from Byzantine, Ottoman, and nineteenth-century periods as well as a
viable (albeit weakening) oral tradition. In the course of initial work in Orašac
in the early 1950s, the Halperns collected a series of genealogies as part of a
general descriptive ethnography of the region. (At that time the investigators
had not developed interest in either historical demography or the structure of
traditional oral expression, nor were they then aware of the existence of an
extensive body of archival documentation bearing on the village—so, in a way,
the ongoing study of Orašac village has also been one of personal discovery,
reflecting as well evolving research emphases within the larger scholarly com-

1. The systematic study of oral tradition, and specifically how traditional oral poetry
was composed and perpetuated, began with Milman Parry and Albert Lord; see especially
The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry, ed. Adam Parry
(Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), hereafter cited as MHV; and Lord’s The Singer of Tales
(1960; rpt. New York: Atheneum, 1968 et seq.), hereafter cited as Singer. Also relevant
is Jan Vansina, Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology, trans. H. M. Wright
(Chicago: Aldine, 1965).