The Anthropology of Performance

A Reader

Edited by Frank J. Korom

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The Anthropology of Performance

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The Anthropology of Performance: An Introduction

Frank J. Korom

When William Shakespeare's character Jacques declares that "all the world's a stage" in the play *As You Like It*, he wasn't kidding. The idea that life is a stage and that we are all actors performing our selves in a routine way on a daily basis is nothing new, but it provides a valuable way to think about how human beings expressively and aesthetically create their cultural worlds through interaction with others. This sort of artistic interaction employed in everyday communication requires us to use all of our abilities, both kinetic and verbal, in a competent fashion to convey meaningful messages to those around us. Indeed, although controversial, some evolutionary linguists have argued that our very first expressive acts that led to the emergence of language as a communicative medium were performative in nature.

Charles Darwin had already pointed out in 1872 that the strongest emotions expressed by animals were lust and hostility, which may have developed as the first verbal threats voiced by humans, especially the male of the species. Yet, while most contemporary biolinguists (e.g., Newmeyer, 2003) would agree that it is extremely difficult to derive human speech from lower primate grunts, groans, yelps, and howls, there is some evidence to suggest that the aggressive oral displays of male apes might be linked to the early development of the human male propensity to use ritual insults and other forms of expletives (see Van Lancker and Cummings, 1999). Indeed, insulting, teasing, and dueling with words (i.e., agonistic verbal behavior) are some of the earliest verbal traits demonstrated by male children, which later in life provide them the skills to function competitively in society (see Gossen, 1976; Eckett and Newmark, 1980). Linguistic evidence suggests that these expressive forms were predominantly male centered at first, functioning to release aggression, compete for status, and increase mating opportunities in a non-violent fashion (Progovac and Locke, 2009), where words replaced weapons, such as in modern-day Yemen, where they replace bullets in the oral poetry of men (e.g., Caton, 1993). From this perspective, performative utterances (see Austin, 1962) are extremely important for the study of human behavior. While another way of thinking about primate

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behavior among ethologists has developed that emphasizes cooperation and altruism over aggression (e.g., de Waal, 1989, 1998), it is still not surprising that one of the perspectives for studying culture that emerged from the discipline of anthropology focused on the role of cultural performances, be they verbal or paralinguistic in nature.

Any history of performance studies could choose to begin a chronological survey of its development at different points in time and in different places in space, since the very nature of this field of study is interdisciplinary. Moreover, precisely because of its interdisciplinary nature, very few theorists would achieve a consensus on where to begin such a survey. Since a variety of other texts already exist that attempt to do precisely what I cannot do in this brief introduction (e.g., Schechner, 1985, 1988; Turner, 1986; Striff, 2003; Carlson, 2004; Madison and Hamera, 2006; Bial, 2007; Bell, 2008; Davis, 2008; McKenzie, Roms, and Wee, 2010), I have chosen to focus instead on a particular set of themes that have been important for the way that anthropology as a discipline explores the variegated roles of performance in culture.

As mentioned above, the study of performance is an interdisciplinary area of research that is essentially grounded in three distinct approaches to society and culture. I take my cue here from a valuable survey of the field of performance in folklore studies authored by Limón and Young (1986), in which they identify three major strands of thinking that coalesced into a common body of concerns over the decades leading up to the publication of their article. The first draws on Marxist notions of praxis, life as situated, ordinary practice – a stone mason building a wall, for example (Limón, 1983, 1984); the second emphasizes cultural display or enactment, when a community presents itself publicly in spectacular events such as the many forms of carnivals celebrated publicly throughout the world (Harris, 2003); while the third focuses on verbal art or oral poetics (Hymes, 1981; Tedlock, 1983), which often highlights what the folklorist Dan Ben-Amos (1972) once called "artistic communication in small groups" – an individual or group of performers, such as a lone ballad singer or the gospel choir of a Baptist church and their audiences. These three streams, developed in sociology, anthropology, and folkloristics respectively (but with a good bit of overlap), have drawn on a repertoire of theories that are further derived from a variety of disciplines ranging from theater studies and classics to political science and linguistics (Fine, 1984). The study of performance is thus a convergent field of inquiry that bridges the humanities and the social sciences, which is where I understand anthropology to be situated.

The purpose of this book is to provide readers with a selection of readings that includes examples of all three of the strands mentioned above from a variety of locations around the world, but situates such case studies within the discipline of anthropology, where key figures such as Milton Singer (1972), Clifford Geertz (1980), Victor Turner (1974, 1982), and James Peacock (1968) have utilized performance as a trope for studying culture writ large. The approach, however, is by no means new, since it builds on earlier precedents set by Bronislaw Malinowski (1992) in anthropology, Américo Paredes (1958) in folklore studies, Erving Goffman (1955, 1956, 1974, 1981) in sociology, and Albert Lord (2000) in classics. The essays included herein will therefore draw on a wide variety of sources that are not limited to anthropology but are extremely relevant to it.

Before presenting the contents of each thematic section, it may be useful to ask what exactly we mean by "performance" in the study of human culture. As one contributor to this volume describes it elsewhere, "performances are aesthetic practices – patterns of behavior, ways of speaking, manners of bodily comportment – whose repetitions situate actors in time and space, structuring individual and group identities" (Kapchan, 1995: 479). Yet while performance is based on repetition, mimicry, and reproduction to form ethnic, linguistic, and national traditions, it also varies to a great extent, even from performance to performance of the same play, song, or epic, which is often referred to as the emergent quality of performance (Lord, 2000). "Emergence" here refers to the dynamic quality of performance that allows each expressive event to be shaped by the interactions between performers and audiences. Due to its emergent quality, variation in performance is inevitable, thus making the comparative study of variation an important factor in understanding performances as agents of social change.

The dynamic and creative tension between continuity and innovation is precisely why the study of culture as performance is so fascinating. Because performances by competent individuals are most often enacted in front of an audience, which also has the right and responsibility to interact with performers, making them "co-performers," the context of performance is central to understanding and appreciating its emergent quality (Georges, 1969, 1979). For this insight, we are most indebted to the aforementioned Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942), the Polish-born anthropologist who is often referred to as one of the fathers of ethnographic fieldwork, along with such other prominent figures as Franz Boas (1858–1942), Frank Cushing (1857–1900), Alice Fletcher (1838–1923), and Ivan Veniaminov (1797–1879).

In describing the genres of oral tradition prevalent among the Trobriand Islanders, among whom he conducted extensive fieldwork, Malinowski famously stated that simply recording the spoken word verbatim is not enough, for it misses the sociological and cultural milieu in which the utterance achieves communicative meaning and significance. Writing words down, he argues, without evoking the atmosphere of the performance, gives us nothing more than a "mutilated bit of reality" (Malinowski, 1992: 104). Indeed, in this oft-repeated statement, an anthropologist who insisted that the audience is as much a part of the performance context as the performers themselves signaled a movement away from the text (e.g., studying the history of a ballad and its patterns of diffusion; see Brown, 2011) and toward the context (e.g., the singer of the ballad and the people who hear it; see Buchan, 1972).

By the late 1950s and early 1960s, this approach was taking root in anthropology. Milton Singer (1961), for example, emphasized the importance of describing and analyzing context in the study of religion, and then went on to develop the idea of what he called "cultural performances," in which members of a community put themselves on public display for others to see and hear (Singer, 1972). This sort of multi-sensorial engagement with our ethnographic subjects and their cultural productions would become one of the hallmarks of experiential and phenomenological approaches to fieldwork (see Stoller, 1989). Yet it was not until the 1970s that a convergence of approaches that focused on the texts being performed as well as on the contexts in which they were performed coalesced into a new and distinct interdisciplinary approach strongly allied to the field of anthropology. The new approach came to be known as the ethnography of communication, and it had strong sociolinguistic components embedded in it (Gumperz and Hymes, 1972; Hymes, 1974).

It is within the ethnography of communication literature that some of the most interesting studies of performances began to appear, which influenced a number of other scholars in a variety of fields to turn their attention to the symbolic and communicative dimensions of performance (e.g., Bauman and Sherzer, 1974). By the 1980s, performance had become an integral component in the contextual study of expressive culture in North America. From then onward, a steady stream of studies has been emerging that deals with the dramaturgical dimensions of everyday life, which has given birth to a distinct field of performance studies that is situated at the crossroads of theater and anthropology, thanks to the collaborations of Victor Turner in anthropology and Richard Schechner in theater studies (e.g., Turner, 1982, 1986; Schechner, 1985).

One of the shortcomings of the performance approach that was pointed out by Limón and Young, however, was that it was too micro-ethnographic, focusing on what sociologists referred to as "ethnomethodology," which often analyzed an unprecedented amount of indigenous detail that some would call the minutiae of everyday life. Responding partly to such critiques of hypersensitivity to context and an overemphasis on ethnographic detail, from the mid-1980s onward anthropology began to question the bounded notion of culture in a world that was caught up in complicated processes of deterritorialization caused by the increasingly rapid flow of people, ideas, and things across national borders in the postcolonial era, which gave birth to transnational anthropology by the 1990s (e.g., Appadurai, 1996; Hannerz, 1996). This theoretical and methodological move now requires anthropologists and other ethnographers to engage in what has come to be known as multi-sited fieldwork (Marcus, 1998), resulting in the enrichment of the anthropological vocabulary with

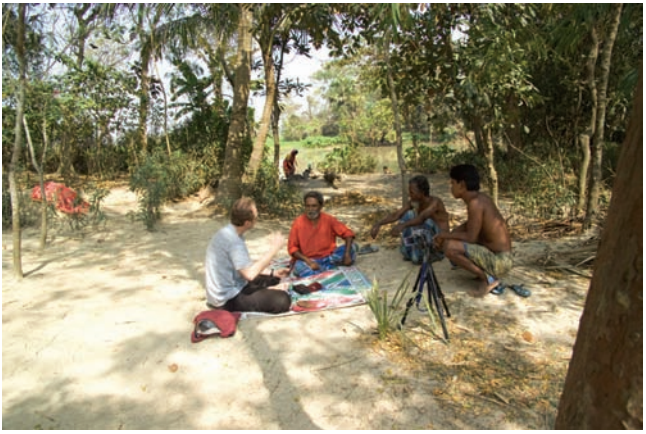

Figure 0.1 *An anthropologist performing an interview with a bard and his audience in India. (Photo courtesy of Frank J. Korom)*

terms such as "hybridity" (e.g., Kraidy, 2005) to describe the new forms of "mixed" traditions that emerged from global flows. Moreover, it has also opened up anthropology to a greater amount of reflexivity, which gave birth to what some have called dialogical anthropology (e.g., Bakhtin, 1981; Tedlock, 1987), a trend that had been growing within the discipline since the 1970s (Babcock, 1980; Ruby, 1982; Fischer and Marcus, 1986), but became an issue of extreme concern in the postmodern period. It also opened up new avenues of thinking that interrogated the role of the ethnographer in the field, an idea which forces us to wonder who is performing for whom. From this perspective, the very doing of anthropology becomes an act of performance (Turner and Turner, 1982; Stoller, 1994; Herzfeld, 2001) (Figure 0.1). A bibliography of further readings is included at the end of this volume to complement the essays included and to facilitate deeper and more thorough research.

It is with these trends in mind that the essays in this volume were selected. In an ideal world, the number and scope of selections would have been greater, but difficult decisions had to be made at the production stage concerning length and other such issues that often delimit the range of possibilities. Nonetheless, it is hoped that the selections chosen will prove tantalizing for readers in coursework or on their own, as they begin to explore the fascinating cultural worlds of performance.

The Layout of the Book

The first section is titled "Performance in Prehistory and Antiquity." It consists of two articles: the first focuses on the role of verbal performance as it relates to work and material culture; the second analyzes the relationship between performance and written texts in classical Greece. As suggested above, the Harvard classicist Albert Lord made significant contributions to performance studies in his quest to understand Homeric epic poetry. His numerous studies of Yugoslavian bards addressed such seminal questions as memory, compositional techniques, and the dynamics of orality and literacy, as well as the impact that cultural encounter and nation building have had on thematic content and technique over the centuries. To open up discussions about such topics in the context of premodern societies, I have included these two examples, which explore the relationship of singing to rug weaving, and orality to literacy.

The second section, "Verbal Genres of Performance," draws mostly on the contribution of folkloristics to the study of performance by exploring specific genres such as African American dozens; Nova Scotian yarns; African proverbs and riddles; and the female songs of an indigenous Australian community. This section draws heavily on the "ethnography of speaking" approach advocated by linguistic anthropologists such as John Gumperz and Dell Hymes, whose combined influence on the study of genres of performance has been significant.

The third section is titled "Ritual, Drama, and Public Spectacle." This section addresses ritual acts such as praying and healing, as well as a dramatic form from India that blends the sacred and the secular, dominant themes that were central to the early debates among the Cambridge School of myth-ritualists (Segal, 1998), and which continued in the theoretical works of Turner and Schechner mentioned above. The closing public spectacle portion of this section, which is indebted to the influential early work of Milton Singer on cultural performances, includes two essays on large-scale events that put cultures on display for others to see, interpret, and interrogate. Because such large-scale events are public, they rely heavily on audience–performer interaction for their success (or failure), and for the multiple meanings that may be conveyed by and taken away from such grandiose affairs.

The fourth section, "Performance and Politics in the Making of Communities," consists of four chapters, all of which offer a look at how performances of various sorts enable identities to be constructed, be it through poetry recitation in a Transylvanian village, the use of oratory in Fiji, the playing of a Commonwealth sport in the Caribbean, or an entire nation performing itself as part of a nationalization process in China.

The last section, "Tourist Performances and the Global Ecumene," explores the way that music, dance, pageantry, and ethnic enactments convey state ideologies or counter-ideologies to a larger public, but also how such ideologies can be contested through individual and small-group agency to shape identities on the local and transnational levels. This final section also looks at the inevitable phenomena of globalization and transnationalism, and how the flow of people, ideas, and practices across national borders due to mass media and quicker movement have affected such things as economic livelihood, agricultural practices, dress, ethnic identity, and even religious practices in such far-flung geographic regions as Hokkaidô, Morocco, the Caribbean, and elsewhere. Equally important, however, is to keep in mind that the local often responds resiliently to such global interventions in symbolically coded modes of resistance (Scott, 1985, 1990; Korom, 1999).

Taken together, this collection of essays should stimulate discussions about the performative dimensions of culture making on a global scale, without ignoring the local intricacies of the cultures presented, nor the specific histories that mold and shape each one.

In short, the essays selected for inclusion in this volume provide a broad range of topics all related to the performance of everyday life. The grouping of some essays may seem rather arbitrary in certain places, but this is inevitable, since culture itself is not easily divisible into vacuum-sealed compartments, such as economics, politics, aesthetics, and so forth. Instead, the divisions are heuristic in nature, intended to create a dialogue between chapters and sections. In the hands of curious, engaging readers, they may provide springboards for lively debate and future research.

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Part I

Performance in Prehistory and Antiquity

1

Singing the Rug: Patterned Textiles and the Origins of Indo-European Metrical Poetry

Anthony Tuck

> They stood there in the forecourt of the goddess with the glorious hair, and heard Circe inside singing in a sweet voice as she went up and down a great design on a loom, immortal such as goddess have, delicate and lovely and glorious their work. Now Polites leader of men, who was best and dearest to me of my friends, began the discussion: "Friends someone inside going up and down a great piece of weaving is singing sweetly, and the whole place murmurs to the echo of it, whether she is woman or goddess. Come, let us call her our."[1]

> But in the more remote sections, and among the nomads, women do all the weaving. They are the designers, too. They invent from year to year all the modifications of the old patterns. The head woman, the traveler Vámbéry relates, makes a tracing upon the earth, doles out the wool, and in some of the tribes chants in a weird sing-song the number of stitches and the color in which they are to be filled, as the work goes on.[2]

Although these passages are separated by considerable distances of time and literary purpose, the common element of singing while weaving is immediately curious. Indeed, the association between the two activities is by no means limited to the texts above, suggesting something more than merely a casual relationship. Throughout the text of the *Odyssey*, passages describing women observed in the act of weaving contain this notable detail. For example, Calypso also sings while she weaves. As Hermes speeds down from Olympus to inform Calypso of Zeus' plan for Odysseus, the text describes her while weaving.[3]

This consistent pairing of weaving and singing in the *Odyssey* has not garnered much academic

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attention. However, observation of modern-day weaving and rug production in nonmechanized households in Central Asia, Anatolia, and India suggests a greater significance to the songs Homer's nymphs sing while they weave.

John Mumford's quote above describes a "weird sing-song" related to the number of threads and colors of a given rug's design. In this case, the textiles Mumford discusses are knotted pile rugs, with knots tied onto neighboring pairs of warp threads between successive rows of the weft. Groupings of knots of the same color, organized according to the grid system of the warp and weft, form the various traditional designs of this type of textile. The traveler Mumford alludes to is Arminius Vámbéry, a Hungarian adventurer and Central Asian spy for the British during the early decades of the 19th century. Vámbéry's description of rug manufacture in Turkmenistan illustrates that specific designs of a carpet are reduced to numeric code once the overall compositional plan is complete: "An old woman places herself at their head as directress. She first traces, with points, the pattern of the figures in the sand. Glancing at this, she gives out the number of different threads required to produce the desired figures."[4]

Such 19th-century descriptions of textile manufacture indicate that traditional weaving practices in some regions of Central Asia and Persia involved the repetition of songs that communicate to a group of weavers specific information regarding thread or knot color and its relevant count position on the warp of a loom. Indeed, virtually any pattern or design that is incorporated into the weave of a textile can be reduced to numeric sequences, given the gridlike structure of warp and weft threads of a piece of cloth. Recent analysis of Caucasian textiles demonstrates how such designs are structured as count sequences.

For example, the design motif called the *balagyvrym* (small scroll) is not produced from memory as an overall design but rather as a count sequence. The weaver, traditionally a girl or woman, would knot once in the outline color, pass over seven warp threads, and knot again in the outline color. Further along the weft of the same register, the sequence is continued. On the next register, the knot sequence begins with one knot opening forward and another opening backward in conjunction with the knots of the previous register. However, the weaver could produce the *balagyvrym* only by a counting system based on the design's original starting position. Once the design turns at a right angle, the count sequence is changed. As a result, the ornamental components of traditional Caucasian carpets are woven exclusively in one position.[5]

In regions of Central Asia and rural northern India, these count sequences still take the form of songs, committed to memory by women of any given household where patterned textiles are produced. Even the nontraditional designs of an enigmatic group of Afghan carpets called *aksi*, or picture, rugs utilize coded rhythmic structures to translate images into woven patterns. *Aksi* rugs, which first came to a broader audience in the 1980s, are often called Afghan "war rugs." This class of textiles responds to the environment surrounding them, incorporating designs of Soviet weaponry, including helicopters, MiG jets, rifles, and hand grenades. While some of these weapon motifs appear to be based on traditional design elements, other types clearly are not. For example, since 2002 several weavers in the region outside of Kabul have been producing rugs that may be loosely termed "War on Terror" rugs. Many of the design elements of this new class are also present in earlier forms of war rugs, but others are obviously patterned after specific elements from an altogether different iconographic source – propaganda leaflets dropped from American planes during the course of military action in that country.[6] In the conversion from a new image on paper to a woven pattern, weavers reduce images to numerical grids that are then remembered and communicated throughout the course of production in the form of a chantlike song, perhaps akin to the one Mumford mentions.[7] Similar means of pattern reproduction are still used in rural areas of northern India.[8] However, in these regions, design traditions appear much more static than the Afghan *aksi* rug phenomenon, suggesting the specific numerical sequences and the songlike structures used to remember and communicate them can be equally static.[9]

These modern examples of women weavers in India and Central Asia suggest that the nymphs in the *Odyssey* sing because the cloths they produce are patterned textiles. In fact, the passage from Book 10 quoted above states specifically that Circe weaves a "great design." Moreover, this passage also indicates that Polites is outside Circe's house when he speaks, yet he knows that she is weaving. In fact, he seems to recognize that she is weaving not from what he sees but rather from what he hears – her singing.[10]

The study of the relationship between this phenomenon and The processes of manufacture of patterned cloth in antiquity, especially from the Mediterranean, is somewhat limited by the scarcity of surviving examples of ancient textiles and the fundamentally oral nature of such mnemonic devices for recording pattern information. While the climate of the African and Levantine deserts, the salt mines of Austria, and the bogs of northern Europe are considerably more forgiving to cloth, scholars of the Mediterranean basin can usually only speculate on the form and design of textiles from that region. Linear B documents from the Late Bronze Age palace of Knossos report an annual tally of almost 100,000 castrated male sheep, animals primarily useful in the wool industry.[11] The earliest example of a well-preserved patterned textile yet recovered in Greece comes from the "Heroon" structure and its associated burial at Lefkandi, which may be dated to ca. 1050 BCE.[12] The preserved belt of this garment displays patterned decoration similar to depictions of textiles on ceramics as early as 1450 BCE.[13] Examples of figurines in garments of patterned decoration may push such a manufacturing tradition in the Aegean well into the Greek Middle Bronze Age, perhaps even earlier.[14] Certainly, numerous Archaic and Classical Greek images of weaving, standing looms, as well as patterned textiles, reflect a thriving and remarkably longstanding tradition of the fabrication of patterned, woven cloth.[15]

Perhaps the most famous textile of the *Odyssey* is woven on the loom of Penelope. To delay her suitors, Penelope promises to choose one to marry after she completes the funeral cloth for Odysseus' father Laertes. She begins the work, only to unravel her efforts every evening.[16] Three years pass before the suitors question the pace of her progress, yet the archaeological evidence for looms associated with the Greek Archaic period suggests that were Penelope fashioning a simple, unadorned winding sheet, little more than a few months would be needed to complete such work.[17] Yet, clearly the cloth is intended for public display. It is part of the publicly visible, ostentatious expense of burial expected of aristocrats. Penelope says:

> Young men, my suitors since divine Odysseus has died, wait, although you are pressing for marriage with me, until this cloth I have finished – lest my yarns perish, wasted. This funeral cloth for the hero Laertes, which is for whenever deadly fate shall bring him low – lest any of the Achaian women in the province should fault me, that one who has acquired so much lies without his doth.[18]

Concern for the public display of the funeral cloth is also reflected in the prothesis scenes characteristic of Geometric-period vase painting. In these scenes, the cloth, which is depicted as a patterned textile, is lifted to display the body to the collected mourners. Moreover, if the time and industry required of women producing such luxurious textiles were the expectation of aristocratic funerals, it stands to reason that elite members of such communities would also seek to memorialize the design of the impermanent cloth on some other publicly visible and lasting medium. As a result, the emergence of complex geometric designs covering the entirety of burial kraters and amphoras, which often have been thought to represent woven patterns, seems to reflect the desire to display such a prestige item in a more durable form.[19] Indeed, elaborate patterned textiles used as funeral cloths may have been the norm for elite burials throughout the Early Archaic period. However, an oral tradition of mnemonic devices for textile designs recorded in songs such as those of the *Odyssey's* nymphs would likely end with the passage of anti-sumptuary laws designed to curtail such, public displays of wealth in burial.[20]

Considering that the *balagyvrytm* design described above is merely one of the simplest in the repertoire of motifs available to the Caucasian textile worker, a song associated with both the number of "stitches" and knot color for an entire rug might be complicated indeed.[21] Presumably, traditional designs of increased complexity required count sequences of substantially greater nuance, all of which, in the absence of some other form of recording, would need to be committed to memory by the weaver.[22]

For example, a hypothetical design of a lozenge similar to, although simpler than, the design preserved on a fragment of cloth from the Phrygian city of Gordion demonstrates the numerical complexity of this process.[23] The design element of the single lozenge is created by passing over or under the warp threads in a specific sequence. Therefore, the individual strings of the warp are represented in groups according to the numerical values associated with portions of the design. The particular design and all its surrounding elements must be numerically deduced prior to initiating the weaving process, since the symmetry of the design is entirely dependent on the number of threads of the loom's warp.[24] The graphic depiction of the lozenge (Figure 1.1), therefore, can be reproduced through the following numerical code:

7, 2, 7
6, 4, 6
5, 2, 2, 2, 5
4, 2, 4, 2, 4
3, 2, 6, 2, 3
2, 2, 8, 2, 2
2, 2, 8, 2, 2
3, 2, 6, 2, 3
4, 2, 4, 2, 4
5, 2, 2, 2, 5
6, 4, 6
7, 2, 7

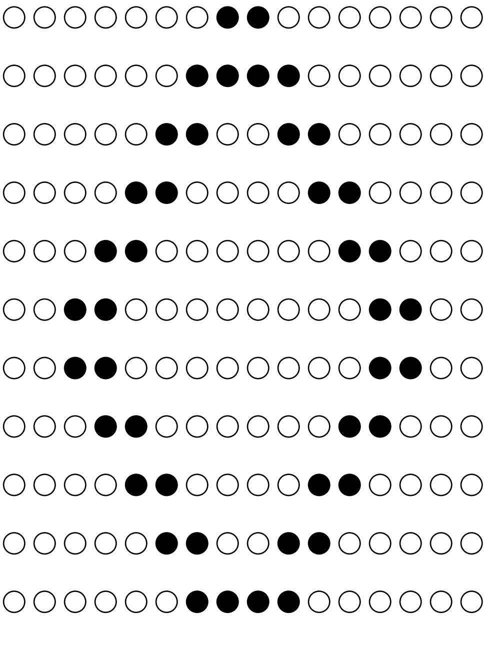

Figure 1.1 *Design of a lozenge similar to that on a cloth fragment from Gordion.*

While the technical processes of manufacturing a textile pattern on a warp-weighted loom vary somewhat from that of a knotted pile rug, such a numerical sequence could still be applied for either technique. Rather than counting threads on the warp and passing weft threads over or under the warp, a knotted pile carpet would require distinctions of color as knots are tied onto successive pairs of warp threads. Regardless, the result as illustrated reflects a pattern that is both visually and numerically symmetrical.

Another example of such a pattern is the traditional fret (Figure 1.2). Here, again, the pattern can be reduced to a numerical sequence:

2, 4, 8, 4, 8, 4, 8, 4, 8, 4, 2
2, 4, 8, 4, 8, 4, 8, 4, 8, 4, 2
2, 4, 2, 4, 2, 4, 2, 4, 2, 4, 2, 4, 2, 4, 2, 4, 2, 4, 2
2, 4, 2, 4, 2, 4, 2, 4, 2, 4, 2, 4, 2, 4, 2, 4, 2, 4, 2
2, 4, 2, 4, 2, 4, 2, 4, 2, 4, 2, 4, 2, 4, 2, 4, 2,4, 2
2, 4, 2, 4, 2, 4, 2, 4, 2, 4, 2, 4, 2, 4, 2, 4, 2, 4, 2
8, 4, 8, 4, 8, 4, 8, 4, 8
8, 4, 8, 4, 8, 4, 8, 4, 8

Theoretically, the elements of the pattern break *down* into repeating phrases, as demonstrated in Figure 1.3. However, the weaver could not numerically express the textile design in such independent units, since the design is not composed of separate vertical elements but rather through the positional interrelationship

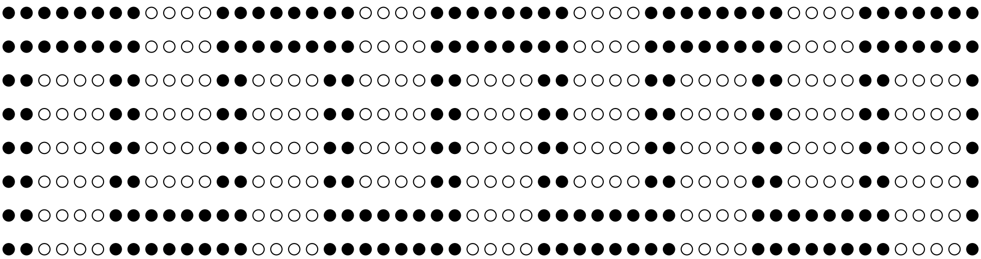

Figure 1.2 *A traditional fret pattern.*

of each entire horizontal line of the textile's weft. Therefore, the successful representation of a simple fret or meander design extending the length of a textile would require that the correct numerical sequence be expressed in its entirety and horizontally across the length of the loom's warp.

The potential complexity of numerical sequences for such designs is not limited to repetitive numerical counts, changing according to shifts in woven patterns with each register of the textile's weft. Textiles manufactured with bichrome threads might necessitate the memorization of such sequences, but the additional element of threads of variable colors would likewise require that further pieces of information be recorded within the overall numerical framework of the textile's manufacture. Complex patterned textiles would call for long strings of number sequences, all of which would require not only memorization of repeating patterns of numbers along the horizontal axis of a loom's warp but also the correct relationship of a given line of numbers to that which proceeds and follows it in sequence.[25] The songs thus appear to be mnemonic devices communicating this information. Without further study it is difficult to know precisely how these songs fully record such designs.[26] However, information embedded within narrative structures, tonal shifts, or rhythmic changes, all in association with song, could conceivably provide the framework whereby the memorization and, equally important, the organization of numerical count sequences and color codes that are repeated each time a pattern is reproduced.[27]

But why would the characters of nymphs in Homeric Greek and modern weavers from Anatolia and Central Asia, separated as they are by vast gulfs of time and space, share this tradition? Perhaps these women sing as they weave because they share, however remotely, a textile tradition that stems from a time and region associated with the earliest roots of the Indo-European family of languages. In spite of the limitations of evidence, it is well established that patterned textiles do not originate in Greece,

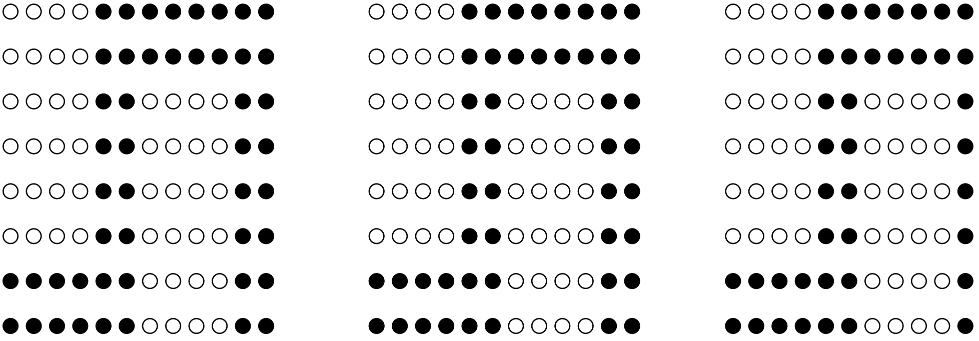

Figure 1.3 *Example of the repeating phrases of a fret pattern.*

nor, it would seem, do the songlike structures used to record and communicate pattern-related information in textile manufacture.

The oldest preserved example of a knotted pile carpet with figural designs was recovered from the permafrost of a kurgan burial in modern-day Kazakhstan and survives in the Hermitage Museum.[28] This elegant carpet is knotted with 32 symmetrical, or "Gordian" style, knots per cm^2 and displays polychrome designs of mounted figures and parading animals framing a central field of star-shaped floral patterns, notable sophistication of this rug surely reflects a well-developed tradition of such production.[29] Additional fragmentary knotted pile textiles come from these same kurgan burials, although most are thoroughly published.[30]

Numerous examples of proto-Celtic patterned textiles survive from the salt mines of Hallstatt Hallein and generally date to ca. 1000–400 BCE.[31] This group of cloth frequently displays plaid twills similar to the tartans manufactured in the regions of Europe where communities of Celtic descent survive today, further underscoring the tenacity of many textile traditions.[32]

While there is little direct evidence of similarly ornate and intact textiles of earlier dates, an Assyrian archival document of the late 13th century BCE. from the reign of Tukuld-Ninurta describes the gift of two multicolored textiles, one of which is described as covered with designs of people, towns, and animals. This first textile is described as the work of a weaver, while the second cloth is noted as the work of a "knotter."[33]

Slightly earlier still are numerous examples of curved blades recovered from female burials in southern Turkmenistan dating to between ca. 2100 and 2000 BCE. According to their excavator, these blades are identical in form to knives used today in the same region to trim the excess wool threads of knotted carpets.[34] Fragments, impressions, and representations of twills and weft-faced weaves[35] displaying design elements suggest such fabrics developed in the Levant and the Caucasus at least as early as 2600 BCE.[36] Although highly fragmentary, traces of Majkop culture textiles preserving elements of patterning are known from the region between the Black and Caspian Seas and date to ca. 3700–3200 BCE., an area and time frame curiously coincident with the region many scholars prefer for the first emergence of speakers of the proto-Indo-European language.[37]

At a minimum, these surviving examples illustrate that complex patterned textiles were manufactured as early as the third or fourth millennium BCE. While we can say very little about how these surviving specimens were manufactured, the numerical elements of their designs, dependent on prescribed intervals of warp and weft threads, remain consistent from their earliest manufacture onward. Even so, a relationship between weaving and song may be found in a text considerably older than the *Odyssey*: the Sanskrit *Rig Veda*. No consensus has emerged as to an absolute date for the composition of the *Rig Veda*, with scholars positing a long tradition of fixed oral transmission prior to the final written form of the hymns.[38] In spite of this chronological uncertainty, several instances of the pairing of song and weaving are found throughout the text. For example, "[t]he Man stretches the warp and draws the weft; the Man has spread it out upon this dome of the sky. These are the pegs, that are fastened in place; they made the melodies into the shuttles for weaving."[39]

Regardless of the difficulties associated with the date of the *Rig Veda*, there is scholarly agreement that the hymns were fully memorized, without significant revision, before ultimately being transcribed.[40] For the purposes of this discussion, it seems significant that the "melodies" appear to be the active agent of this element of the creation myth, suggesting once again that the relationship is significantly more than casual.

In Book 2 of the *Rig Veda*, another instance of the pairing of song and weaving appears: "Loose me from sin as from a bond that binds me: may we swell, Varuna, thy spring of Order. Let not my thread, while I weave song, be severed, nor my work's sum, before the time, be shattered."[41] And, once again, in Book 9 we have the following: "They for the Bold and Lovely One ply manly vigour like a bow: joyous, in front of songs they weave bright raiment for the Lord Divine."[42]

In all three of these instances, the association between weaving and song appears to be more than metaphorical, with song an expected and active element in the production of textiles. Even the "bright raiment for the Lord Divine" hints at the idea of design or patterning. Therefore, although the absolute date of the *Rig Veda* is unclear, ancient examples of the pairing of patterned textiles and songlike structures is not limited to the world of Homer but instead appears to have a far wider orbit. While the evidence of that orbit ranges across Europe, Anatolia, and Central Asia, the examples of this phenomenon share a significant feature: all are associated with regions where the dominant population speaks or spoke languages of the Indo-European family. In fact, Barber has noted that the striking similarity between Bronze Age twill-weave wool fabrics of the Indo-European-speaking proto-Tocharian or Iranian populations of the Tarim Basin in western China and proto-Hallstatt twills of Late Bronze Age Europe are sufficiently similar as to suggest that both populations, upon migrating from the region between the Black and Caspian Seas, carried with them culturally shared technologies associated with weaving such patterned textiles.[43] It is inviting to speculate that the Indo-European population migration, regardless of the exact dates of the various movements, brought not only technologies associated with patterned textile production but also the tradition of mnemonic devices used to record design information in the form of song.[44] As a result, women in the traditional and highly conservative communities in Afghanistan, Anatolia, Iran, and northern India retained this system of textile design production, in some cases to the present day.[45]

Suggestions of similar traditions are also found outside the Indo-European linguistic sphere. For example, one of the taboos associated with the Navajo traditions of weaving states, "Don't weave if you don't know a weaving song. It won't be any good."[46] This directive does not make clear the relationship between the song and the woven pattern and may be more closely associated with religious and medical rituals related to sand painting, a graphic form closely tied to Navajo rug manufacture.[47] Nonetheless, the relationship between song and textile suggested in the Navajo as well as some African cultures might suggest the independent evolution of similar strategies of mnemonic devices in weaving traditions.[48]

Song or chant systems designed around prescribed and repetitive numerical structures to convey coded, pattern-related textile information is a curious phenomenon in its own right. However, such systems certainly invite comparison with another form of numerically derived recitation: metrical poetry. For this reason, it is all the more remarkable that the process of reciting early Greek epic poetry is frequently associated with weaving.[49] The recitation, specifically of Homeric epic, by individuals known as rhapsodes hints at a relationship to textiles. The name appears to develop into a compound word derived from ῥάπτεινἀοιδήν (ῥάπτειν = to stitch or to sew; ἀοιδήν = song), a phrase that suggests that the recitation of an element of Homeric epic was to "stitch" or "sew" a song.[50]

The relationship between traditional Greek recitation of metrical poetry and weaving in particular is expressed elsewhere. For example, Callimachus (fr. 26.5) refers to the recited poem itself as "[t]he word that was woven upon the staff," which, as West notes, "suggests an analogy between the [rhapsode's] staff and the cross bar of a loom."[51] The theme of poetry as a woven phenomenon also occurs in Pindar (*Nem.* 4.44–6): "Weave out, weave out forthwith, sweet lyre, the web of lovely song with Lydian harmony, in honor of Oenone and of Cyprus, where Teucer, son of Telamon, reigneth afar."[52]

Again, a similar metaphor is used twice by Bacchylides (Odes 5 and 19):

> Blessed war-lord of the chariot whirling Syracusans, you if any mortal now alive will rightly assess the sweet gift of the violet-crowned Muses sent for your adornment: rest your righteous mind in ease from its cares and come! Turn your thoughts this way: with the help of the slim-wasted Graces your guest friend, the famous servant of Urania with her golden headband, has woven a song of praise and sends it from the sacred island to your distinguished city.[53]

> Countless paths of ambrosial verses lie open for him who obtains gifts from Pierian Muses and whose songs are clothed with honour by the violet-eyed maidens, the garland-bearing Graces. Weave, then, in lovely, blessed Athens a new fabric, renowned Cean fantasy.[54]

One might argue that the thematic relationship between singing and weaving is merely an effect of the casual similarity of a loom and a lyre, both of which consist of frames for the tension of strings.[55] However, the idea of poetry and song as something woven is not limited to Greek; it has earlier, proto-Indo-European roots, suggesting that the thematic relationship between poetry and weaving existed well before the development of the lyre as an instrument to accompany poetic recitation.[56]

Another historical anecdote seems to underscore the relationship of European and Central Asian patterned textiles and songlike mnemonic devices to populations of Indo-European language speakers. The long history of the manufacture of textiles in Egypt was generally limited to the production of white linen.[57] However, the 18th-Dynasty invasion of the Levant, led by Thutmose III, culminated with the destruction of the city of Meggido. Among the war booty captured in the victory were artisan slaves. Patterned textiles, as opposed to embroidered or beaded cloth, are largely unknown from Egypt prior to the 18th Dynasty but appear at this time.[58] One wonders if the emergent production of patterned textiles in Egypt might not be related to this group of weavers conquered at Meggido and brought back to Egypt as captives. Moreover, a 19th-Dynasty Egyptian lament records the following:

> Lo, citizens are put to the grindstones,
> Wearers of fine linen are beaten with [sticks]
> Ladies suffer like maidservants,
> Singers are at the looms in weaving rooms,
> What they sing to the goddess are dirges.[59]

Although the precise date of the composition of this lament is debatable, the association between weavers and singing once again raises speculation that such weavers, perhaps descendents of the survivors of Thutmose's Syrian campaign, sing as a means of transmitting designs into woven fabric.

Indeed, the origin of pattern-weave textiles, although difficult to place with great precision due to the scarcity of surviving examples, appears to be centered in regions of Europe and Asia where Indo-European language groups are also predominant.[60] The presence of wool as a primary fiber in the regions of Syria and the Caucasus also gave rise to the opportunity to experiment with dyes, thus opening the path to color as a means of pattern production. Such an option was not available to the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age Egyptian weaver, who was limited to flax fibers, and linen is notoriously difficult to dye.[61]

As mentioned above, the similarity of twill-pattern weaves between Austrian Iron Age Hallstatt cloth and specimens from western China of Bronze Age Tarim Basin cloth appears to be due to a common tradition of twill manufacture among the proto-Indo-European language speakers ancestral to both the Celtic and Tocharian/Iranian populations.[62] Apparently, communities of the proto-Indo-European homeland already possessed developed systems of patterned textile production prior to the periods of migration associated with the spread of the Indo-European languages.[63] As these populations settled in regions of Anatolia, Central Asia, India, and western Europe, they could well have preserved a custom associated with textile production whereby numerically organized design information was retained by weavers through number-based systems of chant or songlike mnemonic devices ancestral to the singing of Homer's nymphs and the songs of Central Asia and northern India witnessed in the modern era.

Conceivably, these numerically organized songs, utilized by populations descended from proto-Indo-European speakers to convey information related to patterning in textile manufacture, may also explain why the notion of reciting metrical poetry is so often expressed through the metaphor of weaving in Indo-European languages.[64] Meillet's reconstruction of a system of meter common, and therefore ancestral, to both Greek and Sanskrit serves to explain poetic metrical constructions shared across a wide range of Indo-European languages.[65] Nagy, in challenging Parry's definition of formula as word groupings regularly employed under the same metrical conditions, sees traditional phraseology, whether in the form of prayers, incantations, or the like, containing its own rhythms. Over time, the strength of tradition contributes to a preference for phrases with some of those rhythms over others that do not possess similar characteristics. Eventually, Nagy concludes, "the preferred rhythms have their own dynamics and become regulators of any incoming non-traditional phraseology."[66]

For Nagy, "traditional phraseology . . . generated meter rather than vice versa."[67] With respect to language, this is entirely convincing, but it is also true that the strings of a loom's warp would provide count sequences limited to and bound by the number of vertical threads associated with a given element of an overall pattern, not unlike a poetic metrical system with lines of a prescribed number of prominent positions. While pattern- and color-related information could be transmitted through many different elements of song (e.g., narration, tonal values of music, rhythmic shifts, etc.), the development of metrical systems of recitation would be another possible way to encode weaving-related information in song. Therefore, Nagy's reconstruction of metrical formulation could be applied in equal measure to specific design elements as they evolved in the development of patterned textiles among speakers of proto-Indo-European. In considering Nagy, Foley argues, "even if the habitual groupings originally generated the abstract pattern, later on (as Nagy suggests) the abstract pattern came to govern the deployment of phraseology."[68] In the same manner, the development of rhythmic cadences and song associated with particular patterns, such as those memorized by Caucasian weavers or Mumford's "weird sing-song," would both control and be controlled by the pattern to which they conform. Therefore, it seems possible that the relationship between metrical structures in proto-Indo-European poetry and the rhythmically communicated number sequences associated with the development of patterned textiles by members of that same population is more than merely accidental. Instead, counting systems and sing-songs associated with the production of patterns in textiles may have been an extremely early influence on, if not source of, rhythmic or metrically constructed narratives. Given the vast area where this phenomenon is seen, the mechanisms controlling such patterning certainly evolved along differing paths; but modern observation of weaving songs would suggest that some combination of cadence and narrative played roles in this process of pattern communication. Both the region associated with the origin of patterned textiles and the fact that many Indo-European languages preserve suggestions of a relationship between weaving and poetics seem to indicate that this association developed within the chronological orbit of a spoken form of proto-Indo-European.

Finally, it seems worth noting that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* begin with exhortations of the Muse, who inspires the poet through the gift of poetic ability as well as with assistance in composition.[69] However, the opening lines of both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* appear to reflect the idea that the Muse sings not to the poet but rather through the poet.

> Rage-Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus' son Achilles, murderous, doomed, that cost the Achaeans countless losses, hurling down to the House of Death so many sturdy souls, great fighters souls, but made their bodies carrion, feast for the dogs and birds, and the will of Zeus was moving toward its end. Begin, Muse, when the two first broke and clashed, Agamemnon, lord of men and brilliant Achilles.[70]

And again at the beginning of the *Odyssey:* "Sing to me of the man, Muse, the man of twists and turns driven time and again off course, once he had plundered the hallowed heights of Troy."[71] In both cases, it appears that the poet does not identify himself as the composer of the poem but rather the agent of its performance.[72] Instead, the origin of the poem itself is entirely outside of the poet; it is from the female Muse herself.[73] Given the ancient world's traditional association of women with weaving, one wonders if perhaps the characterization of the female Muse might be something akin to a mythological memory, already ancient by Homeric standards, of a source of rhythmic, perhaps even metrically structured narratives developed around weaving patterned textiles.[74]

A related element of traditional Greek poetic inspiration is the appeal to Memory, the mother of the Muses and another obvious example of a feminine mythological construct related to the otherwise masculine world of epic poetry and its recitation.[75] It is again inviting to see a relationship between such a concept and the mnemonic devices of metrical narrative songs used to create patterned textiles.[76]

Further inquiry is needed to better understand the possible relationships between the phenomena of traditional forms of song or chant that communicate woven design and the ancient association of weaving with poetry. Conceivably, a close examination of modern, surviving songs associated with the production of traditional textiles might better explain how cadence, narrative, and possibly meter function as conveyors of coded information. Moreover, the discussion of the relationship between ancient patterned textiles and the origins of proto-Indo-European metrical poetry is hindered by a scarcity of surviving examples of the former and the conjecture required to study the latter. And yet, both Circe and Calypso sing as they work at their looms, a detail that holds immediate and recognizable importance to modern observers of traditional textile production. Perhaps the notion of the rhapsode of Iron Age Greece as a "sewer of songs" was originally something surpassing mere metaphor, at a time when song and cloth were more fully intertwined.

NOTES

1 *Od.* 10.220–28; Lattimore 1967, 158.

2 Mumford 1900, 25. Mumford fails to offer any further information as to where this specific tradition is found other than to describe the regions as "remote sections," but based on the text, he appears to refer to regions in Anatolia and Persia. He is, however, quite clear in contrasting this activity with the "more progressive" modes of manufacture found in developed areas. These modes are probably pattern books or printed templates for designs, although he does not specify his meaning on this point.

3 *Od.* 5.59–62: "A great fire blazed on the hearth and the smell of cedar cleanly split and sweet wood burning bright wafted a cloud of fragrance down the island. Deep inside she sang, the goddess Calypso, lifting her breathtaking voice as she guided back and forth before her loom, her golden shuttle weaving" (Lattimore 1967, 89).

4 Vámbéry 1970, 474.

5 Kerimov et al. 1984, 12. Seiler-Baldinger (1994, 57) indicates that this technique of rug manufacture is a version of weft wrapping, often referred to as *soumak*.

6 Designs such as the border element of many of these rugs are often taken from the leaflets, as are fragmented elements of English they frequently include.

7 In a correspondence with an Afghan weaver based near Kabul, the author asked her how she transformed images into rug patterns. Her response, through a translator, was: "I don't see it as a picture. I see it as numbers and I make it a song."

8 While traveling in northern India, the author witnessed weavers chanting while tying knotted pile rugs. In the town of Sari Bawadi, several households had set up large looms in their forecourts. Younger members of each family worked knotting rugs while one woman sat to the loom's side chanting. When asked about the chanting, the guide replied, "She is singing the rug."

9 The rug designs typical of this region are primarily Moghul style, suggesting the specific mnemonic means of reproducing such patterns may be as much as five centuries old.

10 I am grateful to Mahoney for this observation.

11 Killin 1964, 1–15; Barber 1992, 104.

12 Popham et al. 1982, 173.

13 Barber 1991, 312–13; 1992, 104.

14 Pekridou-Gorecki 1989, 56–71; Barber 1991, 311–57.

15 An important and informative depiction of operational looms is found in the work of the Amasis Painter, a black-figure lekythos currently in New York (see von Bothmer