The folk preacher of The Art of the American Folk Preacher is a practitioner of the art of delivering metrical, chanted (what he calls "spiritual") sermons. He is from the rural American South and nearby parts of Ohio and Pennsylvania, but he may be found in many other, even urban, parts of the United States because of emigration from the South. He is always Protestant, but he may be either Black or White. Black preaching is the focus of this study.

The spiritual preacher is an artist. Without extensive preparation (more from design -- to let God speak through him -- than lack of education or commitment to the speech event), he delivers an extemporaneous discourse within the demanding constraints of the genre: he must keep on talking, dealing with an announced theme, compressing his speech into rhythmic units characteristic of his own style. This is no easy task. It is Rosenberg's goal to describe what this process is, how a sermon succeeds, and how it fails.

But this is not a study of sermons as an art form. That would have led to a different kind of book. What Rosenberg had in mind was to investigate the composition of epic verse (p. 4) which is based on oral-formulaic techniques (p. 117) made famous by the writings of M. Parry and A. B. Lord on Old-English and Serbo-Croatian poetry. A new and living tradition was needed to test their views, and Rosenberg felt that he had found it in these chanted sermons. He has indeed.

For folkloristic and literary studies Rosenberg has cleaned the path, and we know better now where to go. Here under our very noses are artists performing several times a week as once did bards of old, drawing from a stock of idiosyncratic or traditional formulas and themes, to entertain and to please. We hadn't been listening to them. We had been turned off by what (or what we thought) we heard: repetitious, shouted, "nonsense." Scholars as well as laymen who got to within earshot of their little churches are included in this "we." Here again, as with speaking in tongues, is evidence of what bias prevented us from seeing. 1

As an analysis of a genre this book is strong. It deals with the social setting of the sermon (the church, often Pentecostal -- consistently misspelled): then its content, structure, chanted and formulaic aspects; its themes; and finally the making of a sermon. That is done in 114 pages, but more than that (128 pages) is devoted to a presentation of formulas (in the Parry and Lord sense) and sermon texts, four of the latter in two versions. Since the analytical part also contains considerable exemplification, this book is rich in documentation.

But Rosenberg wants to go beyond a mere description of the genre. This is (to use my own words), dynamic, not static, folkloristics. It is an-
other contribution to the increasing number of studies of folklore as performance, not merely repertoire. He says, "What should interest us is the psychological and linguistic process involved in phrase creation and in the relationship between basically similar phrases" (p. 55). So Rosenberg undertakes to do what is difficult: to explain what the preacher does. When the job is done, psychological factors assume more importance than linguistic ones.

The preacher's task is viewed psycholinguistically, using the term broadly as Rosenberg does. He has to produce spontaneous speech of a certain kind. To explain the dynamics of this process Rosenberg leans heavily on the work of F. Goldman-Eisler. For example, "The preacher can anticipate himself by using immediately some words and constructions which he will also utter later" (p. 110); "the relationship of context to the lines of the moment works both forward and backward" (p.111). Such statements are meant to criticize other approaches to the production of folklore: "Oral literature is, after all, a sequence of interrelated lines, and not the mere amassing of individual and discrete formulas" (p. 111).

The preacher makes his task easier by using formulas of which Rosenberg has identified five different kinds. The stall formula, for example, is "solely for the preacher's benefit (to pause momentarily during the performance to decide what to say next)" (p. 66); for example, "God from Zion" and "Hark Hallelujah [sic]. Repetitive structure is said to serve a similar pragmatic function. But in another place Rosenberg explains parallelism as the result of an extremely rapid delivery (p. 106) without reconciling the apparent inconsistency.

If repetition makes the task easier, so does simplicity. The preacher avoids periodic sentences (those with subordinate and main clause) and polysyllabic words (pp. 101, 102).

Association is also used to account for verbal output, for Rosenberg claims that these preachers' minds have a tendency "to grasp ideas (and sometimes language) in vague clusters and to build sermons around these amorphous frames" (p. 91; illustrated on p. 109).

Oral preaching is said to have a special diction (pp. 101, 102), but there is no special treatment of this topic. A negative observation is that sermons almost never rhyme and seldom alliterate (pp. 5, 19). This may be true if one's criterion is regularity and consistency of pattern, but a particular style need not be measured by the canons of poetry. It is enough that alliteration and rhyme appear in a nonrandom way. There is certainly plenty of evidence for this tendency in certain forms of Black speech, even in Rosenberg's data. Thus, from the sermons of one preacher we get "the old-fashioned black-back Bible," "We've got a boministic modernistic hand-shakin' jack-jawin' world," "They couldn't find ten holy dedicated separated, consecrated people" (p. 123) and from another "He gave man dominion and opinion" (p. 165). But this poetic feature is found in conversation as well. In describing to Rosenberg the process of preaching, one of the informants said that the Scriptures "relates commands; they relates demands" (p. 27). (Italics added here by myself).

I would suggest that what we have here is rhyming talk, a manner of speaking among Blacks that has been recognized for some time even though its social functions have not been adequately investigated. Here is a sample
from Mezz Mezzrow:

Solid ole man, pick up on this rock, and it didn't come from no mudkicker in the block -- I had to bring time for it; don't you see, so raise up Jack and let me be. [my italics]

What Rosenberg meant by linguistic explanations of the processes of oral preaching was perhaps psycholinguistic, because he did not utilize the concepts, methodology, or even results of contemporary linguistics. The most surprising omission is any reference whatsoever to the nature and function of Black speech, a field of study that by 1968 (when his field research was under way) had been fairly well established. Familiarity with this literature would have greatly enriched his interpretation of the Black preacher as an artist.

Because of his bias for Standard English, we will not be able to use his texts for our own analyses. He has chosen not to reproduce "the dialect of the preachers for obvious reasons" except to indicate "when the preacher slurs words or otherwise compresses them" (p. 126). It is not clear whether or not even this aim was pursued consistently, for the transcription is much more standard than one would expect. In vain does one search for consonant-cluster simplification, for example. One expects at least jus' like, but one gets just like. It is even intimated that the transcription is impressionistic, for I'm gonna tell ya "gives more of a sense of the compression actually used" (p. 126). Greater attention to phonetic detail -- if only for one or two of the texts -- would have suggested some of the processes that Rosenberg, as a literary scholar, would have been interested in. For example, gold and soul would rhyme because of the former's simplification to gol. Even more interesting would have been an examination of the amount, place, and function of the "mix" of Standard and Black speech. Does the preacher depart more and more from Standard English as he gets into the metrical and chanted parts of his sermon? Establishing such a correlation will be an important step in understanding how language form varies with speech function. I tried to do such an analysis by searching for double negatives, the use of which is another feature of Black (especially working-class) speech. There were a few: you can't cut no air away, if we don't forgive nobody, you don't have none, don't care what nobody say about ya (p. 129); but usage in these texts is remarkably Standard: I don't have anything else (p. 164).

The part of language that interested Rosenberg most is syntax, but only because "in this most important aspect ... the sermons of American spiritual preachers reinforce what we know generally to be characteristic of the oral style" (p. 58). This promising assertion is supported by a few generalizations about sentence length and sentence structure in the metrical and chanted parts of sermons: they tend to be shorter and simpler (having less flexibility) than in the more normal "conversational" type (pp. 58, 76, 101). It is unfortunate that Rosenberg presented no analysis of sentence types; even a relatively simple type-token description would have been enlightening. It is reasonable to conjecture that further investigation will reveal significant formal features of the genre. In this investigation it will be necessary, however, to abandon the notion that the preachers' "(often) limited education" (p. 103) is one of the constraining factors in sentence structure.

Although I reject educational deprivation as a determining factor in sentence generation (the generalization is too simple; Black speech appears
to be as complex as White speech), I would not rule out the constraining effects of nonlinguistic factors in the production of chanted sermons. Indeed, Rosenberg recognizes this relationship but does not exploit it because of his preoccupation with his thesis about oral composition. The setting, he points out again and again, is extremely important (e.g., pp. 94, 115). If the audience is not with the preacher, he can never get off the ground. Rosenberg describes the relationship between addressee and addressor as "symbiotic" (p. 93). It brings the picture into clearer focus to say that this speech event is created by two sets of participants. The audience is not merely a rooting section; it is part of the same game. With this assumption one would have paid more attention to the audience. Who first begins to contribute from the audience to the event -- men or women? Are they important figures in the church (like deacons or deaconesses)? Where do they sit? What are the utterances from the audiences and what are their effects in the audience and on the preacher? I have heard sermons like these often enough to be convinced that there are significant answers to these questions.

Rosenberg observes three features that are correlated with intense, successful, chanted preaching. (a) Compression. If the sermon's "rhythm is erratic, or the audience dull, or the preacher uninspired, a brief theme may acquire a lot of fat and grow quite flabby" (p. 94). (b) Repetitive addition ("If we be contrary or stubborn or resistant") (p. 112). (c) Formula stalls (pp. 93, 115). But he finds it "surprising" that young preachers should not adhere to the style of the older preachers (pp. 76-78, 93), and "curious" that two sermons on the same day should not be more similar than two sermons delivered a year apart (pp. 89-90). For the first I would suggest that the young may be adopting a different style of preaching, not surprising in this time of rapid social change among American Blacks. For the second it was radio broadcasting as setting or as channel of communication that is sufficient to account for the difference.

I have gathered my comments under four categories: folklore, psycholinguistics, and sociolinguistics. Rosenberg is responsible for the first three. He makes the first his primary concern. In this field, and in some respects, this book is without question an important one. But more attention to sociolinguistic factors (by which I mean aspects of the social use of language) would have made it even more valuable.

The origins and history of chanted preaching is treated only briefly, superficially, and unconvincingly. Rosenberg speculates that it began or was widely popularized during the religious revivals which took place at the beginning of the nineteenth century (the so-called Second Great Awakening). This is a reasonable supposition, for certainly Black Christianity must be related to the history of White, especially popular, religion in the South. But chanted preaching is too particular a genre to be rooted simply in Puritan expository preaching and revivalistic emotionalism (p. 14). Neither accounts for formulaic composition, metrical ordering, and chanting. These are independent, universal speech variables whose history in Protestant preaching will, I suggest, be more complex than Rosenberg's four-page account would imply.

Speculation is unnecessary. There is a vast and accessible body of primary and secondary sources on American Protestant church history and an equally important literature on its preaching. In addition to the Protestant culture, one would want to at least consider the possibility of
African origins for some features of this kind of religious speech event. Although chanted preaching occurs among Southern Whites (p. 16), for example, I doubt that one will find the same kind of audience participation in both Black and White settings. The performance of African folklore is, after all, different from English folklore. Recognizing that fact, we might suggest that Rosenberg has contributed to Afro-American studies. For this reason it merits serious examination.

NOTES


4. The university of, for example, parallelism in certain genres of discourse, including spontaneously composed texts, occurred to me first as a hypothesis. Then it was confirmed by learning that one of the features that characterizes śuddh Hindi -- the most formal and "pure" form of Hindi that is associated with, among other things, religious discourse -- is parallel grammatical constructions of phrases, clauses, etc. (see Christian). One of the features of Black preaching, namely, word pairing, is as old as Reformation English collects and Prayer Book style, according to Charles Ferguson (1972). He speculates that word pairing may have originated in the pairing of Romance loanwords with the Anglo-Saxon glosses attested for Middle English. But he is right in pointing out that word pairing occurs also in the poetic portions of the Old Testament. One should take seriously Gray's observations about oral style (1971); I am in agreement with the general thrust of his argument.


6. For other commentary on this book the reader is referred to a review by William H. Wiggins, Jr., Folklore Forum 4 (1971), 88-89; and another by David J. Winslow in Journal of American Folklore 85 (1972), 191-2. Ed. NOTE.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


