Epics along the Silk Roads:
Mental Text, Performance, and Written Codification

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The idea of launching studies on the epics to be found along the Silk Roads was born in France and Finland almost simultaneously in 1989-90. At the 25th General Conference of UNESCO held in Paris in October-November 1989, a long and bureaucratic, yet historical process was brought to a happy end when the Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore was adopted by the Conference. The aim of this hitherto most authoritative document about the importance of folklore and oral traditions for national, ethnic, and regional cultural identities and for world culture in general was to raise awareness of the role of modern documentation work in creating new cultural resources through conservation, preservation, and dissemination of fragile local traditions (Honko 1989a, 1990b).

Among the members of the Finnish delegation at the conference the idea was born that a comparative survey of some valuable, fairly widespread oral traditions in the form of an international research project or conference would signal the value of oral traditions to the international community. Someone mentioned fairy tales as a possible topic. In the same session, information was disseminated about the UNESCO project called "Integral Study of the Silk Roads: Roads of Dialogue." It was part of the UNESCO program for the World Decade of Cultural Development and funds were allocated to a vast number of conferences and projects in many humanistic fields bringing together scholars from East and West. What about fairy tales along the Silk Roads? They were widespread and well liked by young and old.

After some consideration, however, oral epics came to the fore in our informal discussions. They had more obvious connections to cultural identities and worldviews. What was more important, there were living oral epics among peoples living along the Silk Roads, both the Desert Route (Turkey, Caucasia, Central Asia, China) and the Maritime Route (the

Balkans, India, the Philippines, China). In fact, the Silk Road cultures seemed a veritable repository of vanishing long epics. Earlier in the same year, I had witnessed the singing of Tulu oral epics in southern Karnataka, India, where Indian and Nordic colleagues joined forces to train young scholars in modern fieldwork along the guidelines of the UNESCO Recommendation. It was easy to see that a rescue action on oral epics would not be out of place.

In 1990, the Finnish UNESCO Commission formulated a proposal that epics along the Silk Roads be made an object of international, comparative study. Several other countries showed interest in the initiative. Only at this point did we learn that in Paris, at the C.N.R.S., Dr. Nicole Revel and her colleagues had planned a series of conferences on exactly the same topic as part of the UNESCO Silk Roads Project. An important third partner was Germany, where Professor Walther Heissig (Bonn) had over many years conducted a series of international symposia on Central Asian epics. There was an obvious need to integrate plans.

In November 1992, Dr. Revel, Prof. Heissig, and I visited UNESCO in Paris to explore the potential for a series of conferences under the auspices of UNESCO. It was decided that Finland would arrange the first workshop in June 1993, small in size but European-Asian in its recruitment of scholars. UNESCO and the Finnish Ministry of Education provided financial support, which made the organizing of the workshop possible at such short notice. The Oral Epics Project, a Finnish group of researchers at the University of Turku led by the present writer and sponsored by the Academy of Finland and the Kordelin Foundation, undertook the practical arrangements.

Thirteen scholars were invited to participate in the workshop, which convened at Turku University on June 3–7, l993. The four Asian scholars came from China (Liu Kuili and Mingming Wang, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing) and India (Viveka Rai and Chinnappa Gowda, Mangalore University). The four European participants were from France (Nicole Revel, C.N.R.S., Paris), Germany (Walther Heissig, University of Bonn) and Russia (Alla Alieva and Sergei Nekljudov, Institute of World Literature, Moscow). The Russian delegation was present through its papers only, because its trip had to be cancelled at the last minute due to visa difficulties. The host country was represented by Harry Halén and Petteri Koskikallio from Helsinki University and Lotte Tarkka, Lauri Harvilahti, and the present writer from the Oral Epics Project in Turku. Most of the participants gave two papers, one for the closed workshop session and the other at a concluding mini-symposium that was open to the public.

The scholarly focus

The scholarly interests were twofold. First, we wanted to emphasize the importance of fieldwork and the documentation of living oral epic traditions that still are remarkably rich along the Silk Roads, both the Desert Route and the Maritime Route. The scholars expressed their support for all initiatives aiming at the modern documentation and archiving of invaluable oral epic materials on an international basis. Such materials are needed badly, partly because they are in danger of disappearance in many places, partly because modern audiovisual documentation of epic singing and its social context is necessary in view of the nature of the problems posed by recent research. We want to know more about the learning and producing of long oral epics, their various modes of performance, their ideology and meaning, their relations to ethnic, regional, or religious groupings and identities. This is not possible without new materials created in dialogue with living singers of epics.

Second, the focus was on the process of textualization, starting from the mental text in the singer's mind, becoming empirically observable in the performance, and ending in the written codification, editing, and publishing of the epic text. We want to know how a dynamic, variable oral story, most alive in a dramatic performance, recitation, and dance, can be put into book-form. What are the principles of documentation, codification in writing, comparing variants, and editing a master version for an oral epic that ceaselessly continues to vary?

This scope of interests was too wide to be sufficiently covered by one workshop; it would require a series of conferences. Another goal too ambitious for a small group of scholars was the systematic mapping and comparing of all the epics along the Silk Roads, whose number alone is large enough to prompt a separate inventory project. Despite common trends in the making of epics, the performance traditions and social contexts of epics bestow them with remarkable individuality and in turn make quick generalizations risky.

Because of the short preparation time for the workshop and partly because very different research traditions were represented at our discussion table, it was not possible to harmonize the theoretical points of departure. All the participants came with their own expertise and interests and were free to suggest their topics. The exchanges were vivid as a result of our modest-sized assembly of scholars. Wide horizons and an interdisciplinary

atmosphere were everywhere evident. Undoubtedly, the topic would prove fertile for more systematic work.

Before turning to the papers themselves, let me sketch, however briefly, the general theoretical ambition that lies behind the three keywords: mental text, performance, written codification.

On mental text

By way of "text," what precedes a performance of an oral epic? This classic question arises as one observes the smooth unfolding of a lengthy story from the mouth of the epic singer and the knitting together of its events and episodes into a full-fledged text. What one hears is just one possible realization of the story among many. Even with one and the same singer there is no single master text that the singer simply reproduces. Yet much that existed before and was sung before is being reproduced. Much is remembered and reused, consciously or unconsciously. Still, to characterize the act of performance simply as a performed memorization of the story in question is obviously false; the different renditions of the same story by the same singer vary too much to support that hypothesis.

To accept memorization as the key to epic composition would be tantamount to saying that excellent singers are poor memorizers. On the other hand, memory is their world and instrument at the same time. They are capable of displaying great accuracy of memory, if need arises. Singers of oral poetry may easily master a store of tradition much larger than is usual in a culture dominated by literacy. Thus the aim in their work of composing epics cannot be a word-for-word reproduction of something. Such a verbatim reproduction may occur in sacred texts, for example in charms, incantations, and prayers, but even there objective accuracy may prove an illusion. On the other hand, the singer may claim the "sameness" of renditions that are far from identical.

To be able to understand the production of text in actual performance, it seems necessary to postulate a kind of "pre-narrative," a pre-textual frame, that is, an organized collection of relevant conscious and unconscious material present in the singer's mind. This material consists of (1) textual elements and (2) generic rules for reproduction; we may call it a "mental text." It is not as fixed as its documented manifestations may suggest, but it is only through its fixed manifestations that we can try to construct components of a particular mental text.

The apparent fixity of verbalizations proves to be transparent and fluid when we analyze their variation at the levels of texture (language),

text (content), and structure. The concept of textural similarity is different from the textual one, since similar content may be conveyed by linguistically dissimilar expressions. The same relation may be observed between content and structure: different structures may reside behind similar contents and dissimilar textual contents may reveal the same structure. The singer's concept of "sameness" may reside on the content level, whereas our observation of "differences" between two texts may be based on textural or linguistic criteria.

On mental images

As we try to conceptualize a "mental text," it may be useful, at least in the beginning of our analysis, to avoid the textural level of "textual elements" evident in the available renditions of the story in question. Since fixed verbalization is the final result of epic composition, we should not start there but look for more basic elements, which we may discern through a variety of manifestations of the same narrative. In other words, we may try to proceed in the same order as the singer and begin with what he seems to consider first when preparing a performance.

Let us assume that memory works by mental images and units of meaning rather than by verbal expressions. The images may be lucid and powerful regardless of what their verbal description will be in actual performance. It is the power of mental images that translates into word power. Image power cannot be exhausted by particular words. Hence the variation of linguistic means becomes a method of reaching toward maximal expression, a goal that can be reached only momentarily. The force of an image may be pressed into a particular function for a moment, but when the actual expression is over and the aim has been achieved, the image returns almost intact to its original and polyvalent form of existence in the human consciousness.

Mental images may, just like verbal expressions or for that matter models of mime and gesture, coexist in fairly free and loose order in the human mind. As such they need not "mean" much. Units of meaning are created only when images are related to each other, combined in a particular way or put into a sequence. If we read an epic text from this point of view, what we find are sequences of traditional images. If one does not wish to postulate repeatable verbal expressions or "formulas" as the basic units of epic composition, another possibility for the traditional "basis" is prearranged sets of units of meaning. What Paul Ricoeur calls

"emplotment" (1991:21) may come close to the sequencing of traditional images by the performers of oral epics.

On storyline

Empirical evidence seems to support the idea that two factors dominate the conscious part of epic composition in performance. They are "storyline" and "performance strategy." To be able to decide "what to perform" the singer must be in command of the storyline, a sequence of events and episodes, that is, the plot units necessary for the progress of the story to be told. The number and order of these units is important but not necessarily stable: certain plot units may be said to be more necessary than others, consisting of a kind of *sine qua non*-units (if they are omitted the story tends to be disrupted), whereas some are optional and function as means of emphasis and embellishment.

The storyline is the backbone of the mental text and subject to a careful conscious editing throughout the performance career of the singer. Theoretically, changes may occur in all parts of the storyline, but much of it remains fairly stable for long periods of time. The singer is aware of most major changes he or she has made and may vividly discuss the reasons for them.

On performance strategy

To be able to decide "how to perform" the singer must design a performance strategy. In this work he must pay attention to generic rules and situational limits of performance. This is the behavioral side of performance. The keyword here is adaptation. Large epics can never be performed in their entirety, and performers and audiences have their preferences. The context of performance may determine what parts of the epic must, may, or need not be performed. The singer must define the limitations and contextual requirements that the performance situation sets on his singing of the epic. For instance, a working or ritual context normally implies extensive collateral activities that cannot be ignored by the singer. He must select a time-frame and decide when, how much, and what parts of the epic can be rendered (such decisions may have to be readjusted in the light of unfolding events in the ritual process, audience reaction, and so on). He must also select the mode of performance.

On performance modes

Epics may be performed in solo, with or without instrumental accompaniment, in linear monovoiced narration or with shifts to different tones, melody, poetic category (prose, poem, dialogue, or drama), or by one or more ensembles (lead singer, accompanying singers, dancers, orchestra, and so on). What is essentially the same story can be delivered through a wide variety of modes of performance. In fact, the register may be so broad that it reflects not one but a cluster of genres. Such a situation may bring us to the border of the epic genre and lead us to ask how the performers view this problem. What do they regard as epic and on what basis? The choice of performance mode by the singer normally takes place in advance and affects the preparations. In the performance proper that choice both guides and sets the limits for action.

On performative styles

Within a particular mode of performance, the same singer may utilize different performative styles. In the Tulu tradition of southern Karnataka, for example, one singer may know many epics, each of which has a melody and recitation pattern of its own. Within one epic there is the possibility of linear singing in the third person singular as well as a variety of other performance styles, such as emphatic singing in the first person singular at the peak of the ritual process ("song of presence") or dialogic, antiphonal, and responsorial forms of epic singing representing dramatized alternatives to linear narration. The impact of performative style on the epic text will have to be studied more closely as well as the nature of information and types of expression preferred in different performative styles.

Much of epic scholarship is based on texts without much contextual information. Unfortunately, even in empirical research on oral, living epic traditions these basic distinctions by genre, mode of performance, performative style, and mode of documentation (dictation, singing, induced or societal context) are seldom made. This lack of important contextual information may well render some older materials useless for the study of phenomena sketched above or at least call for new methods of treating the available evidence.

On tradition system

A mental text is thus not only a particular story with some collection of episodes and sequenced plot units but also a source of multiple realizations of a narrative constantly open for editing and rearrangement by poetic or divine inspiration. It is based on the tradition store of the singer, a system of internalized traditions, their earlier performances, and the singer's beliefs, attitudes, and values. Anything relevant in this store may be retrieved to the sphere of mental programming and processing of a particular narrative act. The system is open and the boundaries of the mental text fluid, enabling the singer to select, order, and combine the elements of expression for a particular performance.

In other words, in the tradition system of a singer there are several mental texts of epics and of other genres. They are embedded in a wider "pool of tradition" (cf. Honko 1989b:167-68) from which textual elements may be retrieved across genre boundaries and adapted to new functions. This dynamic brings about an internal intertextuality in the singer's tradition system, a greater availability of materials than we may observe on the basis of actual performed epics. The restraint put on free borrowing comes from the generic rules of reproduction, which determine how diverse elements must be adapted and, above all, what is appropriate and possible to include in the first place.

Mental texts are more fluid than their manifest renditions make us believe. Yet they also preserve their individuality. Because of internal intertextuality, it might be assumed that different mental texts reflect the singer's worldview in a cohesive way. This need not always be the case. For our singer in Karnataka at least, each epic and its ritual context seemed to constitute a world of its own. "I am living in the Siri world," he confessed after having sung another epic (*Kotichennaya*), one that celebrates the virtues of warrior-heroes. His own system of values was anchored in the Siri epic with its female heroines and virtues of nonviolent resistance; it was the worldview of his Siri cult group (Honko 1992).

On manifest text

The text as manifested in performance is a performer's combination of words, gesture, mime, body movement, and musical and rhythmic patterns produced in an interactive collaboration with other co-performers on stage or in the audience. The confines of the manifest text are determined by internal and external factors such as the skill, mood, and

inspiration of the singer, as well as the pragmatic considerations of available time, space, audience, and collateral performance.

Just as the mental text must remain a hypothetical unit, the full representation of the manifest text is extremely hard to achieve regardless of our attempts to reproduce everything in print and picture through modern audiovisual means. The printed text of an epic will always remain a pale reflection, not at all the equivalent of the text manifested in performance.

On multiforms

In a recent paper we contend that an oral epic *breathes* through multiforms (Honko and Honko 1995). The breathing metaphor refers first to the fact that an oral epic has no fixed length; that is, its text may appear in shorter or longer form depending on the factors listed above (situational context, mode of performance, performative style). Second, variation in length is essentially produced by resorting to multiforms, which may be defined as repeatable, artistic descriptions and expressions that are constitutive for the oral epic and function as its generic markers. Although easily perceived as fairly constant elements of epic discourse, multiforms are largely responsible for variability in the epic because their presence or lack, as well as their different manifestations, offer the singer different strategic solutions in the composition-in-singing. Another feature of multiforms is their mobility: they may be transferred from one epic to another, or from one textual position to another, within one and the same epic. This kind of variation makes multiforms polysemous.

It may seem that the enigma of epic composition is largely solved by assuming that the production of epic text is based on a chain-like knitting together of multiforms. Yet the matter is not that simple. For example, multiforms are not absolutely necessary for epic narration. Certain passages may be expressed without any observable multiform, since there exists an epic discourse, a kind of plain narration, without easily repeatable and artistically elaborated expressions. In fact, multiforms belong to the realm of the focusing of meaning, embellishment of detail, and elaboration of expression. They are bearers and transmitters of epic art, not merely of epic plot.

On formulas

It may be asked what the relationship of multiforms is to oral formulas. The basic limitation of the Oral-Formulaic Theory[1] is, in our view, its starting point. Milman Parry's dissertation focused on formulas less than a single line in length, on attributes and epithets that, having once been chosen, seem almost irreplaceable or inevitable under strict metrical rules. This constitutive beginning from the smallest textural unit made the theory very slow indeed to approach larger units and the rules of their application. Even "theme," apparently the term closest to multiform, is somewhat unclear in its orientation to form and meaning: is it basically a plot unit also to be found in what we call plain narrative discourse? The fact remains that Parry and Albert Lord never paid enough attention to the overall storyline or narrative structure. The Oral-Formulaic Theory is almost naive in its neglect of comprehensive narrative models and its innocence in relation to contemporary structuralist trends.

Our approach starts at the opposite end, with the overall storyline and the singer's performance strategy. We wish to examine the mental text and the outline of the epic plot in the mind of the singer. Multiforms seem to hold a strategic position in the textural composition. The storyline endows the singer with the possibility of engaging himself in epic embellishment and the recruitment of multiforms. The moment he prefers elaboration to plain narrative, the store of multiforms is open to choice. Through multiforms it becomes possible to regulate both the length and the emphasis of narration. Multiforms are reproduced in a semi-automatic fashion; "words and sentences begin to invite each other," as our singer in Karnataka put it. Yet the borderline between conscious composition and automatic reproduction is fluid. The shorter elements (or formulas) are more "frozen," less variable than wider multiforms (descriptions), and their reproduction represents what cognitive science calls "implied knowledge," models unconsciously stored in the memory.

Microanalysis on epic production

Much of the present interest in oral epics is thus focused upon the individual singer and the context of his performance. Broad comparative surveys cannot solve the enigma of the making of an epic. Instead, we seem to need detailed, process-based analyses of the learning, "memory

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[1] On the history of the Oral-Formulaic Theory, see Foley 1988.

editing," and performing of living oral epics. These must be based on careful fieldwork, detailed documentation of the epic performance in different settings, and well documented interviews with the singers. The method to be applied has been called dialogic: the singers are experts who are able to converse about difficult analytical problems on the basis of their professional experience. In most cases, they are fully capable of becoming our co-researchers.

Among the papers published in the present volume, there is one laudable example of carefully reported microanalysis of epic singing: a collection history of the Kudaman epic in the Palawan Highlands in the Philippines. For more than twenty years Nicole Revel has worked with materials provided by a singer and mapped out his learning and performance career with linguistic and anthropological data. Shamans and epic bards are close colleagues in the Palawan culture: possession by spirits and epic heroes belong to both, as do the nightly seances of performance, the sacred character of their songs, and the similarity of their melodies. During his long career the singer has developed the epic toward dramatization; what he learned as a basically monovocal recitation has become a multivocal play where not only spoken lines as such but also the voice, tone, and intonation—the soundscape—help to create the characters. Revel makes use of the term "mental text" but in a slightly different meaning from the one sketched above. For her it seems to mean "a ready-made and fixed text" and a "semantic structure," and she refers to the "multiple drafts model" suggested by a reseacher of cognition.[2]

A Finnish-Indian team has documented the Siri epic of Tulunad, in southern Karnataka, in the context of full-moon possession rituals and by way of interviews. The singer of the epic has given valuable information on the sacred and profane contexts of singing, his own learning and singing career, and, most interestingly, his technique of epic production. The differences between the actual sung and dictated versions of the Siri epic and the singer's view on them were studied by Chinnappa Gowda, whose paper could not, for technical reasons, be included in this volume. His observation was that the singer was well aware of the stylistic differences between dictation and singing and their textual impact on performance. The singer found the extra time made available by dictation to be of no use; rather it hampered the natural knitting together of episodes and resulted in

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[2] The model denies the existence of a "master version" in the processing of perception and of a "center" where this processing could take place. The analogy is probably more useful in research on cognition and brain mechanisms (where it has also been criticized; cf. Revonsuo 1993:85-87).

more prosaic, less elaborated forms of expression than were typical of the sung epic.

Intergeneric and intertextual relations of epics

In his contribution Viveka Rai examines the place of epic in the Tulu genre system and elucidates the relationship of long epics to shorter epic poems and work songs. The transition from epic (*sandi*) to work song (*kabita*) is smooth indeed, for example, in the paddyfield, where the women pluck paddy seedlings singing the Siri *sandi* and after a moment plant them in a nearby field to the tune of *kabita*. Such a functional cohesion creates affinity between genres, an affinity that may not be visible in the epic and song-texts but is reflected in the worldview of the singers, who are in this case women. Rai emphasizes the importance of context for our understanding of epics and applies native genre terms and systems when studying intergeneric relations. Rai also warns against quick generalizations about epics that, in Tulunadu at least, "have different origins, contents, forms, styles, structures, contexts, functions, frequencies, and distributions." This kind of individuality means that they may reflect different worldviews—as was pointed out above in the case of *Siri* and *Kotichennaya* epics—and that their intergeneric linkages may entail different partners.

Intergeneric relations are important for Lotte Tarkka, too, but from a different perspective. The material base of her analysis is even more cohesive than Rai's: a handful of variants of the cosmogonic, mythical poem *The Creation* from a relatively limited area in northernmost Karelia. These she analyzes from the point of view of intergeneric linkage (for example, between epic poems and incantantions) and, perhaps more importantly, from the point of view of intertextuality. By studying the concepts of time, space, and ego that permeate this oral body of poetry and finding a cohesion in their utilization, she postulates an "epic universe" based on "the whole of a local culture's narrative texts." Tarkka compares her results to Elias Lönnrot's handling of *The Creation* in the *Kalevala*, discovering certain similarities and differences between him and the oral singers. Interestingly, she defends Lönnrot's solutions against some recent criticism (based on the analysis of the variants of just one poem) by referring to the oral intertextual universe where such solutions are common.

Conglomerate epic

The proposition of an "epic universe" as the basis of epicality and epos may inadvertently change the concept of epic. We are not talking about one epic but many or, as in the case of Finns and Russians who do not possess long oral epics, a conglomerate of poems and narratives in which the same or similar heroes appear. Tarkka is aware of the criterion of length, but she deals with the problem only in passing.

The conglomerate epic appears more frequently in the thinking of Russian colleagues (cf. Honko 1990a:19–21). In theory, conglomerate epics could be postulated on the basis of geographically limited local traditions, the epic poetry of an ethnic or linguistic group, or that of an entire nation or even larger regional entity. The Caucasian Nart epic has many "owners"— Adyghs, Ossetes, Chechens, Balkars, Ingushes, and some peoples of Dagestan and Georgia. It consists of several separate narratives constantly mixing fantastic and realistic features, hoary antiquity, and everyday flesh and blood. The heroes are handled with different emphases in different ethnic groups. Yet the Nart epic is unified, says Alla Alieva in her essay, by its common heroes and the plots attached to each of them. It creates a composite "epic biography of a hero" and portrays the Nart epic society as basically leading a life of high moral standards and laws worked out through centuries by the Caucasian mountaineers.

Epic and identity

The close connection between epic and society guarantees that there is always at least one group who hails the epic as reflecting their own history and character and accepts it as part of their cultural identity. This quality makes epic poetry a tool of politics. First there may be an oral, living epic poetry culture, but the advent of literary culture creates "sacred texts" and eventually, as Lauri Harvilahti shows in his contribution, a literary epos serving the purpose of national identity and integrity, the final stage being perhaps a collation (even in a language other than the original) fabricated in accordance with the concept of culture as defined by the ruling party.

The hegemony of the Romantic paradigm dominated the politics of national epics in Europe from the late eighteenth century onwards. In Asia we also find nationalism, epics, and cultural identity connected, but without the burden of "oral authenticity" required by the Romantic theory on epics. In Asia literary influence on oral materials has not been conceived as the kiss of death; on the contrary, it has increased the value of, say, the Telugu

national epic *Palnāṭivīracaritra*. In Europe, Macpherson became an outcast once his literary share in the *Poems of Ossian* was discovered. The compiler of the Finnish national epic *Kalevala* did everything he could to avoid Macpherson's fate and created a patchwork out of authentic lines of oral poetry. The result is not, as I postulate in my paper, a literary epic, but it is not an oral epic either. Many great epics in Europe, Asia, and Africa belong to this category of tradition-based or semiliterary epics and preserve much of the oral epicality of their source.

Occasionally, the epic concept is attached to a particular place or object that becomes the center of stories representing the fate of a nation. The Wall of Gongwu Town in Quanzhou, built in 1387, is such an object-turned-into-heroic focus, aptly located at the starting point of the Maritime Silk Road in China. Its role was, as Wang Mingming showed in his paper (which we are not able, for technical reasons, to publish here), to deter foreign enemies (the most recent intruders being the Japanese), but in the 1980s, when the wall was beautifully restored from ruins, the interpretation of this Chinese identity symbol changed into something else, namely a token of friendly relations with other nations, tourism, and trade. This means a return to the Golden Age of Quanzhou, the second largest port of medieval China, with all the blessings of the Silk Road.

National identity is but one connection with identities that the epic can secure within a culture. My contribution attempts to illustrate that the epic as the "ultimate song of truth" is present at all levels and gives symbols and meaning to the expression of regional, communal, and individual identities.

Epics in adaptation

That the Silk Roads really were early roads of dialogue between East and West may be substantiated by the distribution and development of great epics such as Geser and Jangar. When these story-cycles spread from one ethnic or linguistic group to another, they interacted with local traditions and ideologies, adapting to particular traditional milieux and often developing new topics and motifs unknown to the donor culture. Thus, for example, when the Geser epic spread to Mongolia from Tibet, several new chapters or sub-epics evolved. According to Sergei Nekljudov, of the twelve chapters of the Mongolian Geser epic only five can be identified, and those in modified form, in the original Tibetan Geser tradition. In his paper he not only establishes this fact but also illustrates the typical changes and developments of plot that fueled the process.

This observation reminds us of two things, namely that many different nations may own a great epic and that the charm of epic narration may not be revealed to foreigners. As Harry Halén notes in his contribution to this collection, "I have skimmed through some of the epics, the aesthetic side of which, as always, disappoints me, whatever the value for linguistics and general social history. To my mind (brought up on the *Nibelungenlied* and Homer and of course the splendid *Kalevala*), hyperbole of the sort which prevails in Mongol hero-tales and those of southwest Asia, virtually destroys human interest."   And yet, as Halén also points out, "the Mongols themselves, for whom the epics are meant, certainly enjoy them as much as present-day youths enjoy the unbelievable deeds of action-film heroes." In other words, understanding epics easily becomes a test in intercultural translation, a work of comprehending the Other.

Along the Maritime Route, India is the motherland of epics, where parallel streams of oral and written epics have flown for centuries. The conflux of these streams has constantly brought about adaptive changes in the ideology of epic tradition: for example, as Petteri Koskikallio shows in his paper, the classical epic story has been used in post-classical folk epics as a tool in propagating a new religious worldview and a new legitimation of ritual.

Silk Road epics—a heritage in danger

When speaking of the Silk Roads, we always remember trade and the material silk thread that put the two early superpowers in contact, Rome (and Egypt) in the West and China in the East. We should remember as well that it was not only goods that traveled along the Maritime and Desert Routes; it was also products of spiritual culture such as epics. In those ancient times, many peoples along the Silk Roads lived in societies of high mobility. In his contribution Walther Heissig refers to Mongolia and its history of warfare, nomadism, and intensive caravan trade. Among the caravan employees was often "one helper who was able to tell tales and epics during the evenings."

The striking fact about the epics along the Silk Roads is that there are so many of them still alive, often almost unknown and undocumented, and certainly in danger of extinction. In Mongolia alone, about 350 epics have been recorded, of which roughly a third have been published. As Heissig tells us, they were all performed by persons aged between 50 and 75, professional singers or people who remembered the texts. In the younger age-groups the interest and ability to perform is becoming rare indeed.

Considering that the normal age for learning epics is between ten and twenty, a dramatic decline may consequently be expected as the old generation of performers passes away. What is going to be lost is not only the epics but oral history at large. An example of the power of this oral memory is the ability of Mongolian singers to recount the line of inheritance of each epic by citing 10-12 predecessors. This genealogy of epic singing thus reaches back nearly 200 years in history.

As Heissig points out, "a territory like Mongolia, situated between all possible influences from all the Silk Roads, tracks, and extensions, must be a mine of motifs, myths, literary plots, and transformations. Under the present circumstances, however, there is not much time left to record the great volume of oral literature still to be found there before the impact of modern technical civilization makes these basic memories obsolete." Mongolia is not the only example. That is why the scholars of the workshop cited UNESCO's Recommendation for the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore, expressing the hope that oral epics would be one of the first targets of rescue action by way of fieldwork, proper documentation techniques, and archiving of the most important materials. The price of this action would be modest against the background of what is at risk.

Considering the multinational situation of comparative research on oral epics, the members of the workshop discussed the political implications of research and expressed the hope that UNESCO will find means to create an international archive for the conservation of the most valuable materials. Safe storage of, especially, audio and audiovisual documents on oral epics and a computerized archiving system to guarantee the proper availability and use of these sometimes delicate materials would be ideally placed on impartial ground under the guidance of an international scholarly board.

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