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The Challenge of Oral Epic to Homeric Scholarship

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Abstract: The epic is an intriguing genre, claiming its place in both oral and written systems. Ever since the beginning of folklore studies epic has been in the centre of interest, and monumental attempts at describing its characteristics have been made, in which oral literature was understood mainly as a primitive stage leading up to written literature. With the appearance in 1960 of A. B. Lord's *The Singer of Tales* and the introduction of the oral-formulaic theory, the paradigm changed towards considering oral literature a special form of verbal art with its own rules. Fieldworkers have been eagerly studying oral epics all over the world. The growth of material caused that the problems of defining the genre also grew. However, after more than half a century of intensive implementation of the theory an internationally valid sociological model of oral epic is by now established and must be respected in cognate fields such as Homeric scholarship. Here the theory is both a help for readers to guard themselves against anachronistic interpretations and a necessary tool for constructing a social-historic context for the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. As an example, the hypothesis of a gradual crystallization of these two epics is discussed and rejected.

Keywords: epic; genre discussion; oral-formulaic theory; fieldwork; comparative models; Homer

1. Introduction

The understanding of epic as a folklore genre is closely interwoven with how the corresponding literary form is read. The basic question whether a given genre in folklore should be defined as part of the system of genres of the community in question, or of a general, worldwide system of genres therefore suffers under an extra complication: Is it possible to reach a definition which takes into consideration all three sets of relations, epic as a literary genre, as part of a general system of folklore genres, and as belonging to a local spectrum of folklore forms?

Until the times of the founding fathers of folklore, epic had been a literary genre and a highly respected one at that, which appealed to the most ambitious poets. Except for the great Indian epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, it was especially a European form, consisting of the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid*, and those who imitated, rivalled or in other ways alluded to these models, not least the huge amount of Renaissance Latin epics.

Already the name of the genre reveals how the interest in this form originated in classical scholarship. In ancient Greek, *epos* means (1) word, (2) hexameter line, and (3) epic poem. The present contribution is no exception when it has the Homeric poems as its point of departure.

In the great days of the invention of the folk it gradually turned out that heroic narrative which might qualify for the name of epic existed among the humbler classes in many parts of Europe, and enthusiastic researchers began looking for it. When the Finnish physician Elias Lönnrot (1802–84) walked from house to house among the poor in the rural districts of Karelia, he not only looked after the sick, he also attended performances of *runor*, poems of grand themes such as the creation of the world and the achievements of heroes in times long gone. Inspired by German theories about the creation of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* he modelled himself over the hypothetic redactor of the Homeric poems and built up a long, well-composed poem, the *Kalevala*, as far as possible consisting of original

runor he had recorded in writing. The poem was first published 1835, but he continued to work it over and an enlarged version appeared 1849.

Intensified fieldwork gradually revealed epic traditions in many other parts of the world, such as the traditions of Gesar, Manas, and the rebel hero Gorogli, widespread in many languages in Central Asia and the Middle East, the Arab tradition of Bani Hilal, the Mandinka of Sunjata, and the Fulani and Bambara of the wars against Da Monzon, to mention only some of the most famous.

In the 1920s H. M. and Nora K. Chadwick began their ambitious research to map out the early literatures of the world and the similarities between them, giving priority to the epic genre. Their results were published as *The Growth of Literature* (Chadwick and Chadwick 1932–40). They based their work on the idea that before literacy a heroic age of warfare might lead to poetic celebrations of the deeds of the warriors, and that that was how great traditions of epic originated. Their approach was continued in C. M. Bowra's *Heroic Poetry* (Bowra 1952), and later in the monumental London seminar directed by Arthur T. Hatto and J.B. Hainsworth. It gathered experts from many fields and resulted in the publication *Traditions of Heroic and Epic Poetry* (Hatto and Hainsworth 1980–89).

Milman Parry and A. B. Lord's oral-formulaic theory was a watershed, moving the focus from content to form and discarding the idea of oral traditions as a step in the development from orality to literacy. Parry's meticulous studies of Homeric formulaic diction, published in his French thesis 1928, were to begin with known almost only to Homeric scholars, and the reception of his fieldwork in Yugoslavia was hampered first by his early death, and then by the Second World War (Parry [1928–35] 1971). However, Lord's seminal book, *The Singer of Tales* from 1960, changed that. Parry and Lord's demonstration of the formulas as a necessary tool for the singer who composes in performance was widely accepted by both Homerists and folklorists or anthropologists.

The flexibility of epic traditions called for methods in fieldwork that focused on the individual performance as well as on the relationship between performer, patron and audience. Where previously singers had been studied mainly as tradition bearers, their personal way of handling their tradition now moved into the centre of study. Researchers registered more than one version of a song, by the same singer or by several, and even tried to follow the history of a song backwards, searching for teachers or other sources. The texts were analyzed for formulas and themes. The bards were interviewed about their personal experience and training, and their own views upon their art were given prominence; also, following the model of Parry and Lord, such interviews were afterwards included in the publications. Perhaps most important of all: Where the Chadwicks had studied oral poetry as a step in the evolution from primitive to refined literature, an emancipation now began towards another attitude, in which oral and written composition are two equally important forms of literature, each with its own aesthetic systems. Just like written literature, oral literature is composed with greater or lesser success, by greater or smaller artists. In this way the Parry-Lord theory confirmed what the young Roman Jakobson had stated in 1929: Folklore is a special kind of creativity (eine besondere Form des Schaffens) (Bogatyrev and Jakobson [1929] 1966).

It was a period of enthusiasm, almost euphoria. In Homeric studies the theory offered an understanding of the enigmatic diction as well as a solution to the old conflict between Analysts and Unitarians. For ages the field had been divided between those who pointed out breaks and inconsistencies and maintained that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* had been composed by different poets, mainly so that latecomers had ruined original masterpieces, and on the other side those who focused on coherence and unity in the overall composition. To folklorists the theory presented itself as an alternative to the Finnish geographic-historic method, which at the time was increasingly felt to have become obsolete (Holbek 1992, p. 4). Many scholars, folklorists and anthropologists as well as philologists studying ancient or medieval epics, set out to find and record traditions of oral epic. They were eagerly analyzing the texts they found with a mind to verifying or falsifying the oral-formulaic theory and to ascertain the extent of its relevance.

To publish an oral epic is hard work, and years may pass before recording, transcribing, editing, translating and commenting is completed, but during the 1970s and '80s a veritable explosion

of editions took place. Whoever had thought that traditions of oral epic no longer existed, or that such singers as there might be, were able to perform only shorter songs, had to revise their opinions. Now a rich flow of editions of hitherto unknown epics as well as of new versions of well-known ones appeared, and the scholars published texts recorded from specific singers, no longer attempting to establish the best or most original example of a tradition. The difference becomes evident when an edition from 1949 in which an African epic is pieced together from ten different recordings is compared to the post-Parry-Lord editions (Boelart 1949).

To give an impression of the force of the new wave I have listed the editions and/or translations I know of which have appeared later than 1960. They were not all inspired by Lord, but their mere existence contributed to the feeling of an enormous quantity of newfound traditions¹. In some cases the importance of Lord's achievement was acknowledged already in the title of a book, such as *The Korean Singer of Tales* (Pihl 1994) and *The Japanese Singer of Tales* (Tokita 2015) (J. A. Notopoulos 1959, who was a classicist, was aware of the oral-formulaic theory before it spread to fieldworkers from other disciplines and published a selection of modern Greek oral epic 1959. As for the African editions, Stephen Belcher has a list which includes quite a few titles I have not had access to (Belcher 1999, pp. 193–212).) When in 1995 M. C. Lyons' *The Arabian Epic. Heroic and Oral Story-Telling* appeared in the midst of all this exciting new fieldwork, it seemed strangely antiquated, building as it does on printed texts.

The result of this mass of fieldwork was overwhelming. Reports told of performances in which bards kept their audiences spellbound from evening to dawn, in some cases for a whole row of nights. Recordings documented repertoires of well over 30 h of singing. Specialized bards, who had been trained right from their early years and later had served an apprenticeship with a master, perhaps with more than one master. Ways of training the voice, for instance by hardening it against nature's sounds such as wind and water during a period in the wilderness. Sophisticated interplay between words and music. An inexhaustible supply of stories² and endless variation—expansion, abbreviation, adaptation to changing audiences and contexts. Skilful composition in performance.

2. Defining the Genre

This feeling of exuberance led to a renewed interest in definitions. What is after all an epic? What links are there between the newfound poems and the old, well-known ones? Somewhere in the background the *Iliad* was lurking—no definition of epic is thinkable that does not include this great Homeric poem (cf. Foley 2005, pp. 197–99). Next, of course, the question: is all this just yet another example of the usual more or less conscious Eurocentrism?

The suspicion was vehemently aroused when in 1970 Ruth Finnegan stated that epic was not an African genre, and it continued for decades to be an important topic in discussions of African oral poetry (e.g., Okpewho 1975; Johnson et al. 1997; Kesteloot and Dieng 1997; the criticism for colonialism was argued with special passion by Mulokozi 2002, p. 1–11 and Bikoi 2007, p. 16). In the second edition of her book Finnegan defended her opinion and did not change the notorious passage (Finnegan [1970] 2012, pp. xxxi–xxxii, 108–10). Daniel P. Kunene, however, who in 1971 had been one of the critical voices, looked back in peace, describing the controversy as follows: “Scholars rose up in arms, and in the process found, or revisited, lots of epics that needed to be revisited, exposed, translated, examined and analysed” (Foreword to Pointer 2013, p. i; cf. Kunene 1971, pp. xi–xvi). In Africa, then, this question added another stimulus for fieldwork.

¹ (Niane 1965; Ba and Kesteloot 1966; Ba 1966; Biebuyck and Mateene 1969; Seydou 1972; Innes 1974; Dumestre and Kesteloot 1975; Innes 1976; Seydou 1976; Clark 1977; Biebuyck 1978; Drewes 1979; Dumestre 1979; Kunene 1979; Pandey 1979, 1982, 1987; Phillips 1981; Beck 1982; Roghair 1982; Skinner 1982; Galley and Ayoub 1983; Revel-Macdonald 1983; Nekljudov and Tömörçeren 1985; Reichl 1985, 2001; Saada 1985; Johnson [1986] 2003; Slyomovics 1987; Bâ 1988; Conrad 1990, 2004, 2016; Smith 1991; Hudak 1993; Priso 1993; Pihl 1994; Collins 1998; Honko 1998b; Kononenko 1998; Revel and Intaräy 2000; Dombrowsky-Hahn 2001; Malik 2005; Rodgers 2005; Bikoi 2007; Reichl 2007; Camara 2010; Reynolds 2010; Blondeau and Chayet 2013; Pointer 2013; Jensen 2016; Oba-Smidt 2016). The songs collected by Parry and Lord: (Parry et al. 1953–80).

² I follow Gérard Genette in distinguishing between story (histoire) and narrative (récit) (Genette [1972] 1980, pp. 25–27).

In the search for a definition to cover epic as an international form without European preconditions many voices were heard. That it is possible to distinguish between genres inside one and the same community is generally accepted, and also that it is important. According to Daniel Ben-Amos (Ben-Amos 1976, pp. 225, 237) genres constitute the grammar of the folklore of a community, and Stuart H. Blackburn declares that they are as essential to the folklorist as kinship rules are to an anthropologist (Blackburn 2008, p. 16). However, whether it is possible at all to reach generally valid definitions, in this case of epic, is less certain. For the Chadwicks and their followers epics were first and foremost heroic poems, but both components of this designation have been drawn into doubt. How are these heroes? Do they have to be male? Do they have to be human? Does heroism have to be martial? Is there a generally acceptable code of heroic conduct? Is heroic narrative necessarily in verse? How is verse defined? Etc., etc. When Finnegan writes “epics . . . or at least lengthy poetic texts that can be so described” (Finnegan [1970] 2012, pp. xxxi–ii), she distances herself from definitions which have become so loose as to be meaningless.

Editing *The Siri Epic*, Lauri Honko handled a poem celebrating three generations of divine female heroes, which did not easily fit into the heroic poem definition. He discussed the problems at some length, insisting that we nevertheless have to establish such “general ideal-typical genre concepts . . . because scholars need to report their findings and compare their results with colleagues” (Honko 1998a, p. 25; Kesteloot and Dieng 1997, p. 29) propound the same argument). The definition Honko ended up with was rather circumstantial, however. As far as my experience goes, the simpler solution chosen by Margaret Beissinger, Jane Tylus, and Susanne Wofford would serve to distinguish epics from other genres, both in general and in specific local systems: Epic is “a poetic narrative of length and complexity that centres around deeds of significance to the community” (Beissinger et al. 1999, p. 2). The “poetic narrative” is broader than ‘poem’; it may include poetry of many kinds, giving room for prosimetrum, so common in many non-European epic traditions, and taking into account that not all cultures have the same idea of what a poem is. “Length” is, of course, relative and must be interpreted as ‘longer than other works in the spectrum of genres of the given emic system’. The heroic age and its heroes have disappeared and are substituted by “deeds of significance to the community”, a combination of great deeds and their reception. It opens up for non-martial works by male or female protagonists. It takes into consideration the functions epics have as true reports of what took place in former times and as stores of the ethical values which unite the singing community. It also allows for protagonists who are not models to be imitated, but rather bad examples to be shunned. Notably, the definition also covers most of the written poems we are used to call ‘epic’.

Without being included in the definition quite a few other characteristics are actually shared by many oral epic traditions. However, whereas the just quoted definition covers both oral and written epic, most of the traits in the following list are relevant only to oral epic—and to Homer³.

Epic is a supergenre. Unlike the basic trio myth, folktale, and legend, epic is not a regular part in the spectrum of genres of a given community, but appears to demand special conditions in order to originate. Where it exists it often works like a kind of umbrella including other genres and is normally considered the most important in the spectrum.

It is cultivated by specialists. Both Brenda Beck, Lilyan Kesteloot, and Bassirou Dieng would on their quite different backgrounds (Tamilnadu in India and various African communities respectively) include this aspect in their definitions of the genre (Beck 1982, p. 196; Kesteloot and Dieng 1997, p. 51). Where performances are very long or extra demanding in other respects, singers undergo many years of training.

³ ‘Homer’ is used as the name of the tradition; whenever the specific poems are meant, they are called by their names, *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

Even though it is hard work to become a singer, it is a widespread notion that the art is a divine gift. Perhaps the singer has been visited by a god in his sleep, perhaps he has been given a book which he miraculously could read and afterwards kept in his memory (e.g., [Slyomovics 1987](#), pp. 11–2 (Bani Hilal); [Reichl 2016](#), pp. 334–35 (Manas)).

Epic singers are male. This is changing these years (cf. [Flueckiger 1996; 1999](#), p. 140; [Hale 1998; Pointer 2013](#), pp. 33–34). However, the common pattern is still that epic is a male genre, in some communities performed only for men, but more often for mixed audiences. Bards of the Siri tradition are mostly male, but their everyday audience consists of women working in the paddyfield.

In telling stories of great deeds, courage, and friendship, epic builds a feeling of mutual connection in the singing community: singer and audience share the same ancestors, way of life, and present conditions. What is told is considered to be true by all parties involved and therefore epic not only unites the singing community, but also maintains the link to past and future. Stuart Blackburn once wrote: “epic is a world view which, like a folk cosmology, structures time and space, sets up meaningful breaks in an otherwise unbroken flow of experience, and provides a field into which new events can be integrated” ([Blackburn 1984](#), p. 370).

The events told and the characters represented are implicitly didactic. “The dynamics of epic . . . are created and sustained through the challenging of boundaries” ([Beissinger et al. 1999](#), pp. 11–12). In former times, chiefs of Mali used to have a singer employed who would also accompany his master in war. He performed his genealogy for him to make sure that he would exert himself to act as a worthy descendant of his ancestors ([Seydou 1972](#), p. 31).

With such characteristics the epic has nationalistic/patriotic potentialities, for better and worse. The social status of the genre is ambiguous in the modern world. For Lönnrot it was a great obligation to give the Finns a national epic (see ([Kuutma 2004](#)) for a similar undertaking in Estonia in the early 20th century). Even in the 21st century the need to strengthen national pride may be an important background for creating epics. Such is the case with Charles Binam Bikoi and his efforts to establish an epic for the Nzimé in Cameroun; his explicit project was to help giving birth to an epic to equal the ancient Greek and Indian epics and in this way boost Africans’ respect for their own literature ([Bikoi 2007](#), p. 14). Contrary to this runs the tendency to despise oral epic traditions. Parry-Lord adherents may regard illiteracy as the basis for great creative art, but to the rest of the world it is the first criterion of underdevelopment. Gene Roghair gave the classical description of this: When in 1967–9 he came to Andhra Pradesh to study literary epic and wanted to include oral performance, he was told that nothing of the kind existed. Nevertheless, when he went out to look for it, he found singers of oral epic literally just round the corner. The problem was that they were low-caste, and everybody suggested that it would be much more interesting to Roghair to concentrate on the classics ([Roghair 1982](#), pp. v–vii; [Flueckiger 1996](#), pp. xiii–xiv, tells a similar story).

3. Oral Epic for Readers

Fieldworkers often underline that oral epics should be experienced live, and that much is lost when a performance is registered, translated, and printed. Nevertheless, wonderful and absolutely readable poems are accessible in translation. A small selection could be: First and foremost the moving Karakalpak *Edige Epic*. The narrative evolves at the court of Timur Lenk. Edige is known from written history, but the protagonist of the epic has little to do with the historical person ([Reichl 2007](#)). Of special interest to lovers of Homer is the Turkic tradition of Alpomish of which parts are cognate with the *Odyssey*. When at a certain point the hero returns to his home incognito he is recognized by his old camel! Karl Reichl has translated a charming Uzbek version ([Reichl 2001](#)). Two beautiful poems from Mali, where closely related traditions among the Bambara and the Fulani celebrate courage and friendship in wars around 1800, can be read in Christiane Seydou’s translation ([Seydou 1972, 1976](#)). The huge *Siri Epic* from Karnataka, translated by Lauri Honko in cooperation with his Indian colleagues, is a monumental reading experience ([Honko 1998b](#)). Rich anthologies are also accessible ([Johnson et al. 1997; Kesteloot and Dieng 1997](#)).

4. Challenge to Homeric Scholarship

Parry worked at a time and in a milieu in which scholars strove to find laws of nature also in the humanities, and his analytical approach to Homeric diction was inspired by structuralist linguistics. In their oral-formulaic theory Parry and Lord together aimed at revealing general systems and establishing rules that came as close as possible to being laws. That was felt as a provocation to many. For example, on concluding the London seminar, Hatto described the experience gathered under the inconclusive title “Towards an anatomy of heroic/epic poetry”: An anatomy, but not quite, and a name to the genre, in which the relation between the core words ‘heroic’ and ‘epic’ was blurred. He underlined that the approach of the expert group had been “holistic”, and that they had not searched for laws in any strict sense (Hatto and Hainsworth 1980–89, vol. 2, pp. 147–48). However, they took into consideration a broad variety of epics, also such of which the origins remain unknown, whereas the Parry-Lord rules are valid only for epics that are oral in all three senses distinguished by Finnegan: tradition, composition, and transmission (Finnegan 1977, p. 17).

More than half a century has passed since the publication of *The Singer of Tales*, decades of intense fieldwork and ever-growing precision of documentation. Oral epic has turned out to be much more magnificent and dynamic than the Serbo-Croatian tradition studied by Parry and Lord. However, despite this enormous increase of documented songs it is striking that oral epics worldwide, in many languages and different cultures, share traits of sociology, style, and aesthetics. Even though the picture delineated by Parry and Lord has had to be modified in some respects, the overall rules have been confirmed: Oral epic follows its own laws, different from those of written epic, just as oral literature in general differs from written literature.⁴ In study after study its characteristics have been scrutinized, and it is hard to imagine that they will change radically with new examples brought forward. By now it is possible to state with a great degree of certainty what is normal and what not in an oral epic tradition. It goes without saying that this is of the utmost methodical importance: the risk of building up hypotheses on comparison with a fieldwork experience that is perhaps special for the singer or the tradition in question has been eliminated, or at least should have been. Scholars’ approach will change, of course, but hardly the overall understanding of oral epic composition.

What has been confirmed beyond any doubt is the flexibility of oral epic. ‘Composition in performance’ is the central idea of the Parry-Lord theory and at the root of the special style with its formulas and themes, typical scenes, narrative patterns, ring compositions, stories within stories, and sometimes narrative inconsistencies. Different traditions express themselves in different forms, and formulas and similar elements are developed so as to be useful in answering the different demands of verse-making in any given tradition. This aspect has been carefully studied in relation to some living traditions (e.g., Arant [1963] 1990 (Russian); Reichl 1992 (Turkic)). It is impossible, however, to ascertain whether the Homeric language with its special way of making old and new forms combine into a convincing *Kunstsprache* finds parallels in living oral epic, because no living epic language has been studied with anything like the care spent on Homer. Now and then fieldworkers suggest that something of the kind might be the case also in modern times, as when William A. Collins states that the language of the Radin Swane epic in Sumatra is difficult to understand even for Besemah speakers (Collins 1998).

Despite all documented flexibility epic singers maintain that they always sing their songs in the same way and would not dream of changing anything. They are proud of their capacities of memory and claim that they carefully preserve the songs they have learned from others and repeat them word for word. Their predecessors have done the same, and that is how they are able to represent events from long ago exactly as they happened. The fieldworker’s tapes demonstrate the opposite. Dwight Reynolds, who achieved to become accepted as an apprentice with an Egyptian master, observed that his teacher was very well able to repeat long texts by heart, word for word alike, but that he never did so when performing (Reynolds 2000, p. 268). Here is an emic-etic conflict, to some degree

⁴ I have attempted a more detailed evaluation of the theory elsewhere (Jensen 2011, pp. 48–73).

based on different opinions about the meaning of sameness. However, the paradox of what singers say and what they do, remains.

Next to the pride singers take in their memory, a clear and enduring voice and physical strength to perform for long sessions on end are admired. If the singer accompanies himself with an instrument, skill in playing the music is, of course, also of great importance.

A successful performance is one that meets the demands of patron and audience. John Miles Foley, who based his studies on texts from the Parry-Lord archives, his own fieldwork experience from Yugoslavia, as well as Homeric and medieval epic, discussed the poetics of oral and “oral derived” epic in a long series of works (e.g., [Foley 1985, 1990, 2002, 2005, 2010](#)). He was especially interested in the balance between the collective and the individual, between diachrony and synchrony.

Epic is both more changing and more fixed than other oral genres: changing because the poems are long and less easily memorized than shorter forms, and because they are exposed to conscious alteration; fixed because it is cultivated by specialized artists.

Change in transmission consists of various types. There are simple errors—the singer forgets, or he misunderstands—and there are the conscious changes. A singer is intent on the reactions of his audience. If they seem interested, he expands, if they tend to get bored, he abbreviates, or he passes to something different that he expects to have their interest. The better he knows his audience, the better are his chances of pleasing it. Since epic is often concerned with the ancestors of the listeners, ideological changes may well occur. A powerful family tends to get powerful ancestors in the epics, a family which loses power or perhaps dies out, disappears from the songs.

Both singers and audiences cherish truth above all and believe that what moves them, sometimes to tears, is that the singer relates events from former times as they actually took place. Originality is an idea foreign to oral epic. Listeners want a version of the past they find corroborated by the world they live in. Epic events are related to the present, and the more understandable they are seen from the present of the singing community, the truer they are felt to be. In all communities, whether written or oral, the past is subject to endless negotiation, but unlike a modern historian the oral bard is not hampered by contemporary sources to the story he tells.

The tradition is a dynamic force, both constant and changing. Singers learn from each other and are all the time eager to expand their repertoires. Often they state that they need some time—days, weeks—in order to master the song. Some maintain that they are able to repeat a song immediately after having heard it performed just once, but that is asserted as something very unusual and highly admired. To the observer this signals that the bard after hearing a new song spends some time on finding a form that pleases him. Such a ‘mental text’ is stable and serves as the backbone of the singer’s performances during which he expands or abbreviates it as it suits the situation. He shares with fellow singers a ‘pool of tradition’ consisting of songs⁵, stories, narrative patterns, typical scenes, formulas, and whatever may facilitate composition in performance. Over the years he also establishes his individual pool of tradition ([Honko 1998a](#), pp. 62–74, 92–116). Where songs change is mainly where one singer learns from another.

As Foley used to say with one of his so-called proverbs: “Oral poetry works like language, only more so” ([Foley 2002](#), p. xiii).

In the meantime research has been moving in other directions. Epic has become less central, for many and quite varied reasons: The interest in defining rules has waned, and the Parry-Lord theory with it. The priority of epic research was perhaps, after all, in itself Eurocentric. Besides, the genre is too time-consuming to be attractive for an ambitious young scholar who is expected to produce a phd in the timespan of a couple of years. However, for research in ancient and medieval epics the efforts to describe with as great precision as possible the general characteristics of oral epic have been invaluable, and such scholars owe the fieldworkers endless gratitude.

⁵ ‘Song’ relates to ‘poem’ as ‘story’ to ‘narrative’.

Often a classicist may be struck by the close similarity between a single passage or detail in some exotic poem and in ancient epic. For instance, Joyce Flueckiger mentions a singer in Madhya Pradesh who describes his own art as follows: “I am singing, joining verse to verse” (Flueckiger 1996, p. 111), an utterance that immediately calls forth the word ‘rhapsode’ to the classicist. Similarly, when Susan Wadley quotes a *Dhola* singer in Uttar Pradesh for invoking his deity with these words, “Oh (Goddess), I have need of four things: beat, throat, voice, and wisdom” (Wadley 2005, p. 142), this prayer is strikingly close to how the rhapsode invokes the Muses at the beginning of the Catalogue of Ships (*Iliad* 2, vv. 484–93). But what is really important is not the more or less accidental similarities, but the norms established in fieldwork.

What is, then, the challenge of oral epic to the admirers of Homer? How far can or must we go when applying general rules for oral epic to the Homeric tradition?

Roughly, it works in two fields, the reconstruction of a social context for the Homeric tradition, and the interpretation of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. To begin with the latter, modern readers have a broad range of theories at hand when it comes to interpretation, and the oral-formulaic theory is just one of them. If the aim is to understand the poems as much as possible as expressions of their own time and culture, the theory must still be the point of departure, but for reading the poems as timeless literature it is less important.

As for the former field, the reconstruction of a context, comparison with fieldwork experience of oral epic is imperative. We have the two long epics, the collection of so-called hymns, and quite a few fragments of other early epics, besides the corpus of Hesiodic poetry. But we have few reliable sources to the context these poems belonged to. Without a careful reconstruction of a probable oral context we risk unwittingly to read the old poems on the basis of our own times and experience.

In this field the research in oral epic is not only a serious challenge, but first of all a generous gift. For instance, what we are told of Homeric rhapsodes consists mainly of bits and pieces, but in a comparative framework a meaningful picture emerges. More generally, an understanding of the way oral epic handles historical information is very helpful for those who want to use the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as sources for early Greek history. Not least, the comparative model is important for the classical Homeric Question of the origin of the two poems. This is no recent claim. In his lectures 1884–6 on the comparative history of epic, the Russian scholar A. N. Veselovsky criticized the German philologists of his day for not accepting oral epic tradition as a key to understanding Homer (referred to by Victor Zhirmunsky, (Chadwick and Zhirmunsky 1969, p. 319)).

5. An Example

Here I shall concentrate on a single topic central to the Homeric Question. I have already discussed it on two former occasions,⁶ but at the time I approached a readership of classicist colleagues. The present publication is a great opportunity for me to write for folklorists and perhaps even provoke reaction: Is my implementation of the rules at all acceptable?

In Homeric scholarship it is a widely held opinion that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* somehow crystallized out of a broad oral tradition, and that when these two epics had been composed they were so generally admired that singers learned them by heart and performed them at given occasions, such as the competitions regularly arranged by the city-states. Some scholars think that it was a written text that acquired this position, others that the two epics had this status as orally memorized texts for some centuries before they were recorded in writing. However, this seems to me an untenable hypothesis, built on the fact that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are so wonderful. We love these poems so much that the idea that they should have immediately superseded all other—lost—Homeric poems is easily embraced. Seen in the distance of two and a half millennia it may appear reasonable, but the general

⁶ (Jensen 1980, pp. 128–58; 2011, pp. 214–47).

framework established by living oral epic traditions should warn us against what is presumably an optical illusion.

- (1) Epic traditions do not aim at creating one, definite form. Any singer will compete with others and find a mental text that to him is the best and which he will abbreviate, expand or adorn according to circumstances, but the tradition as such is not teleological. If a singer acquires a reputation as especially remarkable, other singers will seek him out and try to learn from him, but the tradition will still be open to change, and other singers will develop their versions according to their capabilities and the demands they meet. Oral traditions work with persons rather than texts. If oral poems have names at all, such names signify a song, not a version of a song. Just as a language does not aim at creating one perfect utterance to oust all others, the tradition manifests itself in countless variations. A thought-provoking impression of the richness of a tradition can be had by a glance at the 5½ pages in which Wadley lists the oral performances she has consulted in her analysis of the epic of Raja Nal (Wadley 2004, pp. 200–5).
- (2) Oral traditions do not easily disappear. They may coexist with writing and printing for centuries, and even in the modern world in which they are up against radio, television, film and new aggressive forms of music, they still exist. What happens is rather that they adapt themselves to new conditions (Dundes 1969). Epic, which is dependent on social occasions where people gather for long enough to allow for protracted narrative, will typically shorten the single episodes so as to fit briefer forms of conviviality, and the traditions will move from centre to periphery, or from the upper classes to the lower. Chao Gejin reports how the Parry-Lord theory has become a stimulus for fieldworkers in China, and that they have rich traditions to study (Gejin 2010; cf. Tokita 2015 for research on Japanese traditions inspired by Parry and Lord). Karl Reichl describes how the epic tradition of Manas is still very much alive in modern Kyrgyzstan (Reichl 2016). That two individual versions of a single tradition, whether written or not, should have removed all others would be unheard of.
- (3) A singing community may own a written text of some epic, but it is not used the way Homeric scholars imagine for the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Such texts are rather appealed to as family heirlooms, perhaps adding to its status in society (Collins 1998, p. 4 (Sumatra)).

The hero Gesar is celebrated over a huge area in central Asia and in many languages. A Mongolian version of the story was printed in Beijing 1716. The tradition is also known from many manuscripts, which contain always only one episode. Such an episode may well run up to 800 pages. In the 1950es the tradition was still growing, new episodes being added to the story (Stein 1956, pp. 1–2). These written texts were probably not accessible to the oral traditions, whereas in Northern Africa the songs of Bani Hilal have been known for centuries also in cheap printed books, to be easily found in the market places. However, both traditions have been developing according to their own oral rules, without notable influence from the written texts.

A recent example, unusually well described, is a manuscript from Yangzhou in China, edited in facsimile with transcription and English translation by Vibeke Børdahl and Liangyan Ge (Børdahl and Ge 2017). It was written c. 1912–13 and contains a part of the “Western Han Saga”. This is a tradition of prosimetric storytelling, performed as a continued narrative over daily sessions of a couple of hours. The whole story fills the teahouse during three months approximately. The manuscript was preserved in a storytellers’ family, who had “kept the script, more for the sake of honouring the ancestors than for its practical use” (p. 4, cf. Børdahl 2005, p. 238). The owner, who was a professional storyteller himself, told Børdahl of his education: As a child he had attended his father’s performances, next he had studied the manuscript, and finally he had set out for an oral apprenticeship with a master of the tradition. This personal teaching was the important part of his learning the craft. Over the years he had annotated the manuscript in various ways (Børdahl and Ge 2017, pp. 4, 714). Presumably the written text has ensured his own performances against dramatic changes of story. Nevertheless, when in 2003 Børdahl attended his

performance of a passage from the manuscript the performed version was c. twelve times as long as in the written text (Børdahl 2005, pp. 250, 258, 283–91; cf. Wadley 2004, pp. 79–91, of a literate Dhola singer in Rajasthan, who owned a written text but expanded freely in performance).

According to Børdahl and Ge, such manuscripts “were usually kept secret well into our modern period. They represented a kind of “capital” for the storytelling profession, during a time when storytelling was a relatively lucrative business” (Børdahl and Ge 2017, p. 34, cf. pp. 25–26).

- (4) The characteristic composition of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* speaks against the idea of a gradual crystallization. Their length notwithstanding they are episodic, each focused on the telling of a single event, Achilles’ wrath, and Odysseus’ homecoming. They move *in medias res*, both beginning in the tenth year, of the war and of the return from the war respectively. By means of subtle expansions, such as for example themes being doubled or multiplied, stories being told within stories, passages from other parts of the story being incorporated, they achieve not only to become very long, but also to cover a considerable part of the Troy story in the framework of narratives concerned with only a few days of the events. Right from antiquity the two epics have been much admired for this.

In the Chinese manuscript of the Western Han tradition the story is told in a straightforward way, relating events in the order in which they took place. In oral performance, however, Chinese storytellers as well as epic singers worldwide are experts in abbreviating and expanding so as to meet the demands of patron and audience. Especially they are proud of their capacities for expanding, and their techniques are similar to what we find in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. A manuscript containing the story of the Trojan War from beginning to end – such as it is told by the mythographer Apollodorus in late antiquity – might have made sense.

The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are obviously too long for performance. Most of all they resemble the Gesar manuscripts mentioned by R.A. Stein. Whatever the reason for the poems being recorded in writing, the written texts cannot have been meant for singers to read and memorize.

- (5) The episodic character of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* suggests that they belonged to a cyclic tradition, as is so often the case for the great epic traditions of our times. Singers, patrons, and audiences know the full story well enough for the performance of a single episode or a couple of them to make sense. Early painted or carved images from both Greek and Etruscan art bear witness to the fact that the Troy story was well known all over the Greek or Greek-inspired world from as early as artists illustrated myths at all, and in endless variation. The situations represented rarely occur in the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*.

Cyclic traditions work in various ways. They may consist of episodes kept together only by celebrating special heroes or events, such as the Serbo-Croatian songs studied by Parry and Lord. The Albanian tradition works in the same way, and so do the Nyanga tradition of Mwindo (Biebuyck and Mateene 1969; Biebuyck 1978), the Bambara and Fulani tradition of Silámaka and Ham-Bodédio (Seydou 1972, 1976), and the Philippine tradition of Tuwaang (Manuel 1958). Another possibility is that the singing community agrees roughly on a chronological order such as is the case for the tradition of the Bani Hilal immigration in North Africa; the story runs from the birth of the hero Abu Zayd and the tribe’s departure from Arabia to the final annihilating battles in Morocco. What is performed is one or a couple of episodes as it pleases patron and audience (Reynolds 1995, p. 16). Flueckiger reports something similar of *Candaini* performance in Madhya Pradesh (Flueckiger 1996, p. 133), and Wadley of *Dhola* performance in Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan (Wadley 2004, xi–xii; 2005, p. 146). The Gesar tradition is structured according to the hero’s life story and that of Manas and his eight generations of descendants likewise, but the descriptions I know of are not quite clear as to whether this structure is emic or etic. The Palnadu tradition has an accepted chronology, but some of the episodes have special status because they

are prescribed for performance at certain points of the annual festival of the heroes (Roghair 1982, pp. 26–29).

A story much discussed in Homeric scholarship is that of the Athenian tyrant Hipparchus who in the 6th century B.C. reformed Homeric performance at the Panathenaic festivals; from now on rhapsodes should recite so that where one ended the next one took over. Much speculation has been invested in the question of how the whole *Iliad* and *Odyssey* could be performed during the few days of the festival, and how many rhapsodes it would take to perform all 48 books. One for each book? or did they perhaps engage singers to perform four books each, or perhaps eight? (the poems actually lend themselves to division into such sections). To me the problem is caused by asking the wrong question, or rather by taking for granted that ‘Homer’ meant ‘the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*’, not the Homeric tradition as such. As soon as this precondition is discarded, the story becomes simple: what Hipparchus ordered was that the rhapsodes who participated in the competition were supposed to tell the whole story of the War of Troy, performing the episodes so that they followed a chronological thread. Every new rhapsode was expected to be able to immediately connect with the former, independently of how far he had advanced in the continued story.

This is just one detail in the complicated web of interpreting the sources for how the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* came into being; for a comprehensive discussion I refer to a previous work (Jensen 2011). Fieldworkers rarely venture into the field of Homeric scholarship, but I noted with interest that the Gesar expert Walther Heissig once suggested an opinion close to mine. After the accomplishment of the London seminar Hatto had been invited to the Rheinisch-Westfälische Akademie der Wissenschaften, and in the discussion following his lecture Heissig suggested that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* might not be definitive (endgültig), but rather single versions which happened to have been recorded (Hatto 1991, p. 28).

Summing up, living oral epic is a rich field in which research has only just begun. The basic general rules have been revealed to the advantage of comparative studies, but the individual traditions remain largely unexplored, to be studied for their language and style, their funds of cultural and human experience, their handling of past and present of the communities where they belong, for the way different singers move in their tradition, and presumably for the mere pleasure of enjoying poetry.⁷

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