Routledge Studies in Medieval Literature and Culture

THE ORAL EPIC

FROM PERFORMANCE TO INTERPRETATION

Karl Reichl

The Oral Epic

This book focuses on the performance of oral epics and explores the significance of performance features for the interpretation of epic poetry.

The leading question of the book is how the socio-cultural context of performance and the various performance elements contribute to the meaning of oral epics. This is a question which not only concerns epics collected from living oral tradition, but which is also of importance for the understanding of the epics of antiquity and the Middle Ages which originated and flourished in an oral milieu.

The book is based on fieldwork in the still vibrant oral traditions of the Turkic peoples of Central Asia and Siberia. The discussion combines fieldwork with theory; it is not limited to Turkic epics but branches out into other oral traditions.

Karl Reichl is Professor Emeritus of the University of Bonn (Institute of English, American and Celtic Studies). He has had visiting professorships at Harvard University, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris, the University of Madison at Wisconsin, and the Karakalpak State University in Nukus. His main research interests lie in medieval oral literature and in contemporary (or near-contemporary) oral epic poetry, especially in the Turkic-speaking areas of Central Asia.

Routledge Studies in Medieval Literature and Culture

Zöopedagogies
Creatures as Teachers in Middle English Romance
Bonnie J. Erwin

Before Emotion
The Language of Feeling, 400–1800
Juanita Feros Ruys

Forging Boethius in Medieval Intellectual Fantasies
Brooke Hunter

Sanctity and Female Authorship
Birgitta of Sweden & Catherine of Siena
Edited by Unn Falkeid and Maria H. Oen

Tracing the Trails in the Medieval World
Epistemological Explorations, Orientation, and Mapping in Medieval Literature
Albrecht Classen

Vernacular Verse Histories in Early Medieval England and Francia
The Bard and the Rag-picker
Catalin Taranu

Polyphony and the Modern
Edited by Jonathan Fruoco

The Oral Epic
From Performance to Interpretation
Karl Reichl

Barbarians in the Sagas *of Icelanders*
Homegrown Stereotypes and Foreign Influences
William H. Norman

For more information about this series, please visit:
https://www.routledge.com/Routledge-Studies-in-Medieval-Literature-and-Culture/book-series/RSML

The Oral Epic
From Performance to Interpretation

Karl Reichl

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON

First published 2022
by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

and by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Reichl, Karl, author.
Title: The oral epic : from performance to interpretation / Karl Reichl.
Description: New York : Routledge, 2021. | Series: Routledge studies in medieval literature and culture | Includes bibliographical references and index. | Summary: "This book focuses on the performance of oral epics and explores its significance for interpretation. The discussion is also relevant for the understanding of medieval and earlier oral-derived epics. The study is based on field-work on the oral traditions of the Turkic peoples of Central Asia and Siberia"-- Provided by publisher.
Identifiers: LCCN 2021002065 | ISBN 9780367761318 (hardback) | ISBN 9781003189114 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Epic poetry--History and criticism. | Oral tradition in literature. | Epic poetry, Turkic--Asia, Central--History and criticism.
Classification: LCC PN1303 .R35 2021 | DDC 809.1/32--dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2021002065

ISBN: 978-0-367-76131-8 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-032-03808-7 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-1-003-18911-4 (ebk)

Typeset in Sabon
by SPi Global, India

Access the Support Material: https://www.routledge.com/9780367761318

Contents

Illustrations

A Note on Transcription and Transliteration

The Cyrillic letters of **Russian** are transliterated according to the widely used Anglicized system. Note that Cyrillic <e> is here always transliterated as <e>; it is, however, pronounced /ye/ at the beginning of a word and after a vowel. Cyrillic < э> is transliterated as <è>. Palatalized consonants are marked by <'> (<l'>, <n'> etc.).

Most of the **Turkic languages** here exemplified use the Cyrillic alphabet (with individual modifications); Turkish, Azerbaijanian (or Azeri), Uzbek, Turkmen, and Karakalpak use the Latin script. For Turkish and Azeri the Latin writing system is used. All the other Turkic languages, irrespective of whether they use the Cyrillic or the newly introduced Latin script, are written in a unified system, modelled on Turkological practice. The letters <a>, <e>, <i>, <o>, <u> symbolize clear vowels as in Italian; <ö> and <ü> correspond to the sounds found in French *peu* and *mur*, respectively; <ā> (in Uzbek) is a long, back *a*-sound, as in English *ball*; <ï> is a back unrounded /i/; <ä> symbolizes an open /e/. For some Turkic languages (also Mongolian) long vowels are represented as double vowels, such as <uu>.

Most consonants correspond roughly to their English equivalents; <j> is pronounced as the <j> in English *jet*; in some languages (Kazakh, Karakalpak) it is pronounced as the <g> in English *genre*; <r> is always rolled; <kh> is a voiceless velar fricative as in Scottish *loch*, <gh> is the voiced variant of <kh>; <q> is a velar /k/; the pronunciation of <w> varies between /v/ as in English *vat* and /w/ as in English *why*, <aw> is generally pronounced as /au/, <ow> as /ou/.

In Turkish and Azerbaijanian orthography <ş> corresponds to <sh>, <ç> to <ch>, <c> to <j>, and <ğ> to <gh>; the latter is not pronounced in Standard Turkish, but lengthens the preceding vowel. In some words (of Arabic origin) <â> instead of <a> is found. In Azeri the open /e/ is symbolized by <ə>; in both Turkish and Azeri <ı> corresponds to <ï>; in order to distinguish capital <ı> from capital <i>, the latter is written <İ>.

Despite my attempt at synchronizing the various transliteration systems for the Turkic languages, some words shared by several languages

appear in different spellings. As far as possible, I have tried to keep dialect variations of terms and names to a minimum.

For Yakut terms I have followed Russian usage. The Yakut term for the epic is *olo***ng***kho*, but it is customary to refer to the epic by the term *olo***n***kho*. In Yakut, intervocalic /s/ becomes /h/. The epic singer is called *olongkho***h***ut* in the original language, but designated by *olonkho***s***ut* in the literature; the same applies to other terms such as *abaasïï* (Yakut *abaahïï*). In my transliteration of Yakut, <ə> is transliterated as <ä> and <дь> as <dy>.

Persian and Arabic words are transliterated according to the system employed by the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*. Note that the letters <s>, <z>, <t>, and <d> with a dot underneath denote so-called emphatic sounds in Arabic words. Macrons denote long vowels; <ā> in Persian stands for a long open /o/.

In the transliteration of **Indian** scripts, letters with a dot underneath (as in *paṛ*) denote retroflex sounds. For **African** languages, I have used the spellings found in my sources. They show some variation depending on whether they come from French or English-speaking scholars, or from Francophone or Anglophone parts of Africa. Some of the variations (such as *mâbo* vs. *maabo*) are mostly typographical, others (such as the name of the epic *Sunjata*) are due to linguistic variation.

Preface

Un libro de ciencia tiene que ser de ciencia; pero también tiene que ser un libro.
A book of science must be about science, but it must also be a book.

José Ortega y Gasset

This is one of the guiding principles prefaced to Ernst Robert Curtius' monumental *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, originally published in German in 1948. It expresses the dual nature of a scholarly book: it must conform to scientific standards, but it must also be readable. The author of a scholarly book wants to say something to the scientific community, something of interest, something that will advance our knowledge, however minimally. But the author also wants to be read. This implies walking a tight-rope, balancing between technical jargon for the initiated and comprehensibility for a wider circle of potential readers. Every book is a new venture in its attempt to be 'de ciencia' and to be 'un libro'. I sincerely hope that this study on the oral epic is both – and that it will find readers.

Although writing is generally a solitary occupation, it is never without friends and companions. To acknowledge my debt to all the individuals who have not only helped me with this particular book, but have guided me through my scholarly life, leading to this publication, a long list would be necessary. From among the many teachers, colleagues and friends who have encouraged me to pursue the study of oral epic poetry, I would like to thank specifically Professor Joseph Harris of Harvard University. Through his initiative I had the opportunity of teaching Turkic oral epics as visiting professor at Harvard in 1990, a unique experience and a decisive influence on my future research. I also owe a great debt to all the singers and narrators I met and recorded in the various Turkic-speaking areas where I was able to do fieldwork. I began my fieldwork at the time when the Soviet Union was still in existence and when the Chinese province of Xinjiang was just beginning to open up to Western scholars. In that period it would have been impossible to do fieldwork without

the help of local scholars and the universities and academic institutions behind them, in my case in particular the Uzbek Academy of Sciences and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. I am grateful to Professors Qabul Maqsetov, Tora Mirzaev, Sarïgül Bahadirova, Mambetturdu Mambetaqun, Yang Ling, Chao Gejin, and many others for their support. For help with specific questions in connection with this book, I would like to thank a number of scholars from various Turkic-speaking areas: Aitalina Kuz'mina (Yakutsk), Busarem Imin (Ürümchi), Talantaaly Bakchiev (Bishkek), Alymkan Jeenbekova (Osh), Monire Akbarpouran (Iranian Azerbaijan), Säydin Ämirlän (Nukus), and Jabbār Eshānqulov (Tashkent). For critical suggestions, I am very grateful to my colleague and friend Dr Julia Rubanovich (Jerusalem) and to my friend since high school days, Dr Joyce Irwin (Princeton). My special thanks are due to my wife Deborah, who has devoted many an hour that she could have spent more pleasantly to the drudgery of correcting the English of my manuscript. Despite all this help, mistakes and inaccuracies may still be found, for which I alone am responsible.

Bad Honnef, December 2020

Introduction

> The era of epics is past: it is now the era of statistics.

This is one of the impressions the writer Joseph Roth brought back from his travels in the Soviet Union in 1926. Roth was a shrewd observer and his reports, originally published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, make fascinating reading, also in view of what was still to come after 1926. This pithy saying catches the spirit of the age: the burst of industrialization and the impending collectivization. The 'era of epics' might have been past in the young Soviet Union by 1926, but epics, in the literal sense as epic poems, had not yet disappeared, neither in Russia nor in the vast area of Soviet Central Asia. Substantial collections of Russian narrative songs, *bylina*s, were still recorded in the 1950s, and in some areas of Central Asia and Siberia oral epic traditions are still alive at the beginning of the twenty-first century. It is in Central Asia that my own field-work and research on oral epic poetry is centred and where I was first confronted with the questions that led to the writing of this book. I would therefore like to begin with a personal note.

I started my first research trip to Central Asia, supported by a stipend of the German Research Foundation, on 1 June 1981. Coming from Frankfurt with Lufthansa I arrived in Moscow's Sheremetevo Airport together with a group of German journalists, who were making jokes and having an animated conversation till they, like everybody else, were silenced by the gloom that long and very slowly moving queues in front of the Soviet passport control booths used to spread. I was taken care of by the Soviet Academy of Sciences and put on a flight to Tashkent on the next day. By 1981 I had published two small books of Uzbek and Turkmen folktales in the original language and in German translation, but was otherwise, by my publications and training, a medievalist and linguist, working in an English department. My interest in oral

epics was kindled as a student by my reading, and Wilhelm Radloff's magnificent multi-volume edition (and German translation) of Turkic oral poetry, housed in the Bavarian State Library, had motivated me to try to travel to Soviet Central Asia. In Tashkent I was met by Tora Mirzaev, Head of the Folklore Department of the Pushkin Institute of the Academy of Sciences of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic. That was in 1981. In the 1990s Tora Mirzaev went on a pilgrimage to Mecca and thereupon called himself Tora-hāji Mirza. Also after independence, the Pushkin Institute was re-named as the Alisher Navā'ī Language and Literature Institute in honour of the fifteenth-century national poet of Uzbekistan.

My research project in Uzbekistan was to consult the manuscript (from 1927/28) of an Uzbek oral epic which I had translated (entitled *Rawshan*) and to clarify textual problems. What I was hoping for was to meet, listen to, and possibly record an Uzbek epic singer or *bakhshi*. This turned out to be difficult. I was told that there were no epic singers in Tashkent and that in order to travel to the nearest place where an epic singer was to be found I needed special permission, issued by the Ministry of Interior Affairs. As this permission was not obtainable – but my disappointment great – my hosts decided to ignore Soviet protocol. They organized a minibus, sat me in the middle of a group of five or six people and off we drove to a kolkhoz in the district of Boka, about 70 km south of Tashkent, close to the Tajik border. We arrived at around midday; the kolkhoz director was persuaded to let the singer off work; our party was welcomed and waited upon in a pavilion-like open-sided wooden garden house. And then came the singer. He was a man in his fifties, tall and slender. He had a tanned, leathery face, clearly much exposed to the elements, and wore a moustache. He had a young voice, with a warm timbre. He was wearing the usual Uzbek hat (*doppi*), a square beret, covered in black silk with white embroidery, in a pattern typical of the locality. His name was Chāri Khojamberdi-oghli, but he was generally called Chāri-shāir, Chāri the singer-poet. Chāri-shāir was born in the Qashqadaryā province in 1925. Our party was joined by the local teacher, who had written down some of Chāri-shāir's repertoire. Chāri-shāir was known to the Tashkent scholars, but had not been recorded by them. He was clearly excited to be asked to perform, and he talked about his art with enthusiasm.

Chāri-shāir had, of course, come with his *dombira*, a two-stringed plucked instrument. He tuned his instrument, began to strum the strings, modulated a melody, played a sequence of chords, fell into a fast and pronounced rhythm, and then began to sing. Chāri-shāir first sang about his *dombira*, then intoned another song, a song about the Communist Party. I knew that epic singers would introduce their performance with short, topical, and often improvised songs, called *terma*. Songs about the *dombira* have been written down from a number of Uzbek *bakhshi*s,

and songs about the Communist Party naturally figured in collections of modern Uzbek folklore. But then Chāri-shāir began a new song:

Arzim eshit, khalāyiqlar!
Uzaqtan keleyātibman,
Ghamli kunlarga bātibman:
Bir gozaldi yoqātibman,
Bir gozaldi yoqātibman!

Hear my request, o people!
I have come from afar,
I have fallen into despair:
I have lost a beautiful girl,
I have lost a beautiful girl!

This was the beginning of an episode in *Rawshan*, the Uzbek epic I was translating. I had originally been attracted to this work in Derzhavin's Russian translation by the beautiful verses, the mixture of romance and heroic deeds, perhaps also by the Oriental grace of the illustrations. *Rawshan* existed as a poetic tale in my mind, keeping company with other poetic tales, such as *Aucassin and Nicolette*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *The Faerie Queene*, *Eugene Onegin* … But now something new was born. Here, in the afternoon heat of early summer in Uzbekistan, with the perfume of the orchard, the smells of the food on the table, the singing of birds and the sound of the voices of humans and beasts in the background, half dazed with the dream-like feeling of being in unfamiliar surroundings, in a different cultural world, here poetry became song, the narrating voice of the tale became the voice of the singer, the poetic tale in the mind acquired a new existence: as a tale heard and as poetry sung, absorbed with one's eyes and ears, in the bodily presence of the teller and singer of tales and his listeners.

To me as a medievalist, this experience seemed to be a journey undertaken in a time-machine, transporting me back to the days when the *Chanson de Roland* or some Middle English popular romance was still performed by the jongleur or the minstrel to an enraptured audience. Here I was, in the last quarter of the twentieth century, witnessing the traditional art of orally performed epic poetry by a skilled singer of tales, an art that must have been practiced for centuries. True, Chāri-shāir's words and melodies were no continuation of some European medieval oral tradition, and I was listening to an excerpt from an Uzbek *dāstān* and not to an episode from a *chanson de geste* or a Middle English romance. But I was listening to the oral performance of a story and of poetry that I had first encountered as a written text and which had now been transformed into something new and exciting. What I had known theoretically was now experienced: that performance is the primary mode of existence of

oral poetry, the written text is, as it were, an afterthought. So far I had experienced the pressed flowers of oral poetry, now I was in the presence of the living flower, fully exposed to it with all the senses of the beholder.

For someone coming from a textual culture where epics exist in written form only, two basic questions arise: How is an oral epic performed, and how does performance impinge on interpretation? To ask how an oral epic is performed is to ask whether recitation is in singing or speaking, with or without instrumental accompaniment, by one or more performers, with or without additional implements, with or without the incorporation of dancing or miming. Many more questions of this kind can be asked about the manner, time, occasion, locale, and participants of an epic performance. These questions can in theory be answered by descriptive and comparative analysis. The more detailed the description and the wider the network of compared cases, the more revealing our answers will be. Description and comparison will indeed be the main concern of much in this book.

The question about how performance impinges on interpretation is more difficult to answer. If we have an oral epic in textual form – like the edition of *Rawshan*, from which I made my translation – we know that practically all performance features have disappeared. I am saying 'practically', because some texts preserve 'performance markers', such as narrator's comments, deictic particles and other elements much studied in medieval and ancient Greek epic texts as indications of their presumed oral background. For *Rawshan* it is possible to get somewhat closer to performance than the edited text allows by consulting the manuscript which preserves the original transcript of the singer's performance.[1] Even then, however, everything that is not textualized is missing. How does this affect our understanding and appreciation of the epic? Are we only missing 'ornamental' elements or are we missing something significant?

It is easier to formulate what is at stake by using an example from art. Let us take Michelangelo's well-known fresco of the creation of Adam in the Sistine Chapel. Adam is on one side, stretching out his arm toward God, God on the other side, almost touching Adam's forefinger with his. If we have a black-and-white reproduction of this scene, its composition and the powerful gesture of the two outstretched arms and almost touching forefingers will be preserved. With a black-and-white reproduction we can interpret many aspects of the scene, but will have to leave aside an important aspect of pictorial art, colour. Is this how text and performance relate to each other, when one element is missing, perhaps important, perhaps only marginal? But this is not all. For the Michelangelo fresco, a full understanding presupposes a cognizance of the whole pictorial programme of the Sistine Chapel. A reproduction would have to be embedded in reproductions of the immediate and total context of the scene. So not only one element, colour, is felt to be missing, but the whole context is absent. The context extends also to

the architectural structure for the pictorial programme. In fact, a full contextualization calls for either the presence of the beholder *in loco* or at least a video reproduction. Does the text of an oral epic have to be similarly contextualized in order to be fully understandable? In other words, is performance as an event with all its various elements essential for interpretation?

With the frescoes in the Sistine Chapel we can even go one step further, if we remember that it is a *chapel*, a place of worship, which, of course, is furthermore the locale of the conclave, the election of a new pope. Should we keep this in mind as well? C. S. Lewis begins his study of Milton's *Paradise Lost* with an amusing argument in favour of considering the use and function of a work of art before interpreting it:

> The first qualification for judging any piece of workmanship from a corkscrew to a cathedral is to know *what* it is – what it was intended to do and how it is meant to be used. After that has been discovered the temperance reformer may decide that the corkscrew was made for a bad purpose, and the communist may think the same about the cathedral. But such questions come later. The first thing is to understand the object before you: as long as you think the corkscrew was meant for opening tins or the cathedral for entertaining tourists you can say nothing to the purpose about them.
>
> (1942: 1)

Is *Rawshan* only fully understandable if, in addition to the experience of performance *in vivo*, the cultural framework in which the event takes place is considered and analysed?

These are the main questions this book tries to answer. As to the question of how an oral epic is performed, the description and analysis of performance has to be limited to specific cases if the material is to stay manageable. Of course, the more cases are added, the more detailed the picture that emerges will be. By the same token, however, road signs indicating major directions and diversions will lose their visibility when submerged in a forest of signs. The book is organized into three parts, *Settings* (Chapters 1 to 3), *Performance* (Chapters 4 to 7), and *Interpretation* (Chapters 8 to 10). In Chapter 1, I will explain what is to be understood by an oral epic in this book and in Chapter 2, I will introduce the 'singer of tales' in various oral traditions, that is, the different types of singer-narrators and their art, characterized by both traditionality and creativity. Chapter 3 provides a sketch of analytic approaches to performance. In the second part, I will focus on embodiment in Chapters 4 and 5, first on the singer's voice in Chapter 4, then on gesture and gesticulation in Chapter 5. The musical form of epic performance – solo or with the accompaniment of a plethora of musical instruments – will be the subject of Chapters 6 and 7. In the third part, *Interpretation*, the

problem of the expression of meaning and mood in music will be tackled in Chapter 8. Narratological aspects will be in the foreground in Chapter 9, and in Chapter 10 the topic of discussion will be the dynamic connexion between epic text (or textualized epic) and performance, in particular with reference to visualization and contextualization.

As emerges from the personal note at the beginning of this introductory chapter, my primary material is centred on the oral epic traditions of the Turkic peoples, or rather of peoples speaking a Turkic language. Turkish, the national language of Turkey, is only one of many Turkic languages, a family of languages that stretches from the Balkans – via Turkey, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan – to Xinjiang in north-western China, with sizable groups of speakers of Turkic languages in Iran and Afghanistan. A number of Turkic language-speakers are found in various parts of the Russian Federation: in the area of the Ural Mountains (Tatars, Bashkirs), in the Altay-Sayan region (Altaians, Khakas), and in north-eastern Siberia (Yakuts). All of these ethnic groups had an oral epic tradition, and some of them either still have one or had one until recently.

While my primary material comes from Turkic oral traditions, this is not a book about Turkic oral epic poetry. The questions I am asking and the answers I am proposing are more fundamental and more general. For this reason I have included a number of oral epics and traditions that enlarge and diversify the picture presented by Turkic oral traditions. My choice has been guided by familiarity on my part with the languages and cultures in question, by the occasional possibility of witnessing and recording a performance, and by the availability and reliability of sources. In order to provide some background information on these traditions I have compiled an appendix with basic data and bibliographical references (Appendix A). More information on the audio and video examples discussed in detail will be found in Appendix B, and on recordings of the music of epic in Appendix C. There is also a glossary of musical terms and of non-Western musical instruments.

While music is considered an important performance element in this book, I should make it clear from the outset that the book is neither written by a musicologist nor destined for a specialized musicological readership. The reader I have in mind is someone who is interested in oral epics and who is wondering, as I am, what all the non-textual, or non-textualized, components of an oral epic performance are and what, if anything, they contribute to the understanding of the epic. My musical notations are meant to give a visual impression rather than an exact notation of sound. It is not necessary for the reader to read music; my comments on the music of epic and the occasional notation are intended to be accessible to everybody.

For the transcription (or transliteration) of non-Latin scripts, see the Note on Transcription and Transliteration (pp. ix–x). Abbreviations of

book series and journals are listed at the beginning of the bibliography. All translations of primary sources are mine unless indicated otherwise; my translations of quotations are marked by 'trans.' after the page reference.

After these practical considerations I would like to return to the central issue, well illustrated by the following quotation from the edition and translation of a Bambara (West African) version of the epic *Silamaka Fara Dikko* by Ousmane Bâ:

> A great deficiency of all textualization is that musical elements, facial expressions and gesticulation of the *djali* [singer], which often have an explanatory and disambiguating effect, cannot be rendered adequately without severely limiting the readability of the text. The same is true of the reactions of the audience, such as snapping one's fingers, singing etc., which we were unable to record in the text of this study.
>
> To tell the truth, the text transcribed is merely the skeleton of an epic, which takes shape only in actual performance. A textualized epic such as this one can therefore only serve as makeshift to give no more than a superficial impression of the epic, an impression which, on account of the sole medium of writing, is rather one-dimensional. (1988: 6 trans.)

Ousmane Bâ is, of course, right. His remarks do, however, whet the reader's appetite for knowing more about music, facial expressions, gesticulations and snapping one's fingers. It is hoped that the chapters that follow will 'flesh out' the 'skeleton' and compensate for the makeshift character of editions like Bâ's.

Note

1 On the singer (Ergash Jumanbulbul-oghli, 1868–1937) and the manuscript, see Reichl 1985a: 4–12.

Part I
Settings

1 How to Identify an Oral Epic

> In the disputable and usually futile task of classifying the forms of poetry there is no great quarrel about the epic.
>
> (C. M. Bowra, *From Virgil to Milton*)

In Plato's dialogue *Laches*, Socrates asks the question: 'What is courage?' Laches, a Greek general during the Peloponnesian war, is quick to give his answer: 'Why really, Socrates, it's not hard to say: if someone is willing to stay in ranks and ward off the enemy and not flee, rest assured he is courageous.' Socrates is not pleased with this reply. Instead of defining courage, Laches and also the other participants in the dialogue give examples of what they consider courageous behaviour. Socrates was not asking for examples, but for a definition. His goal was to work out the idea (*eidos*) of courage.

The 'idea of the epic' has been elaborated since the beginning of Western literary criticism in Aristotle's *Poetics*. With the Homeric poems as models, Aristotle stated that the epic is representational (*mimētikē*) and narrative (*diēgēmatikē*), in metre (*en metrō*) and of a certain length (*mēkos*); like tragedy it is a representation of heroic action (*mimēsis spoudaiōn*). With variations and specifications Aristotle's definition has survived until today. Bowra could confidently say that 'there is no great quarrel about the epic' and continue by defining the epic along Aristotelian lines as follows: 'An epic poem is by common consent a narrative of some length and deals with events which have a certain grandeur and importance and come from a life of action, especially of violent action such as war.' Other scholars, as for instance J. B. Hainsworth in his book *The Idea of Epic*, base their studies on fundamentally the same principles.[1] This is not to say that Aristotle has held sway in genre theory unchallenged. The epic has received attention in Western thinking from Hegel to György Lukács and Mikhail Bakhtin, and also structuralism has left its imprint on modern theorizing, with studies on genre by Tzvetan Todorov, Gérard Genette, and Jacques Derrida, to mention only some.[2] Dissenting voices can also be heard from scholars in the fields of folklore and cultural anthropology, who argue against an understanding of genre entirely based on Western literature.

Oral: Shades and Grades

Before I address some of the problems raised by looking beyond the confines of Western literature, I will briefly comment on the qualification 'oral'. Oral poetry is oral first of all in the etymological sense of the word 'oral': it is 'mouthed' poetry, poetry spoken, recited, or sung. Its primary reception is aural, that is, that of poetry which is listened to rather than read. Not all orally performed and aurally received poetry, however, is oral in the sense we understand the word when we speak of oral poetry. A recital of Gounod's 'Ave Maria' is oral, but the song is not an oral poem. Oral poetry is not only orally performed, but also orally transmitted. This means that a song or a narrative is learned by word of mouth in a *chain* of oral transmission, not just from one person to another. Typical examples of oral transmission are the 'singers' schools' discussed in Chapter 2. Oral transmission does not exclude the existence of written texts, which might be diffused parallel to oral transmission or might even be the ultimate source of an orally performed and transmitted poem, but the emphasis is on oral in the transmission process. Typically folksongs in non-urbanized, traditionally oriented societies are transmitted orally, rather than memorized from a printed text. This is true of the ballads collected by Cecil Sharp in the Appalachians at the beginning of the twentieth century. It is axiomatic of the songs collected from societies where literacy is rare or even non-existent, as in the songs discussed in Maurice Bowra's *Primitive Song* or the songs collected by Raymond Firth from the Tikopia on the Solomon Islands in the Pacific Ocean.[3] Songs of this kind were not only transmitted orally, but also composed orally, without the help of writing. Oral composition can mean the spontaneous improvisation of songs, such as the contest songs popular among the Kazakhs and other Turkic peoples, but the term is not co-extensive with that of improvisation. We know that oral poets have often spent time and energy on composing, polishing, and elaborating their works of oral art.[4]

Oral composition is not synonymous with what Albert Lord calls 'composition in performance', by which he means the ability of singer-narrators to perform an oral epic smoothly and fluently, not on account of a great power of memorization, but on the basis of their ability to weave a poem together from various building blocks, in particular formulaic lines and expressions and so-called 'themes', that is, motifs and typical passages or scenes. His definition of the oral epic, at least in the case of the South Slavic epic tradition, incorporates the concept of composition in performance:

> Stated briefly, oral epic song is narrative poetry composed in a manner evolved over many generations by singers of tales who did not know how to write; it consists of the building of metrical lines and half lines by means of formulas and formulaic expressions and of the

> building of songs by the use of themes. This is the technical sense in which I shall use the word 'oral' and 'oral epic' in this book.[5]

The concept of composition in performance underestimates the importance of verbal recall in the training situation on the one hand and on the other has a tendency to minimize the creative power of singers, reducing their art to a mechanical combination of pre-fabricated elements.[6] Furthermore, in an article entitled 'How Oral is Oral Literature?', Ruth Finnegan argues that the puristic view of orality as expounded by Lord in his *Singer of Tales* is not tenable. It does not conform to reality. The illiterate singer of tales who has acquired his epic songs from the oral performances of other singers and has no written version of his song is a marginal rather than a typical case. In reality, oral and written traditions keep crossing paths, and it is therefore perhaps preferable to talk of an oral-literate continuum. She notes that 'the relation between oral and written forms need not just be one of parallel and independent coexistence, far less of mutual exclusion, but can easily exhibit constant and positive interaction'.[7]

This is certainly true. As to oral transmission, even in traditional societies, for instance in Central Asia a century ago, literacy was not totally uncommon among epic singers, and today it is, of course, the norm. Some of the works performed by these singers were available in manuscript or print and even used in performance in some local traditions. Moreover, both in Central Asia and in other parts of the world we find the public 'reader of tales' as an alternative or supplement to the singer of tales (see Chapter 2). The impingement of written texts on oral transmission is particularly noticeable in the epic subgenre of romance. In some cases writing is, for instance, also used in the learning process. The Iranian storytellers (*naqqāl*) who perform episodes from the Persian national epic *Shāh-nāma* ('The Book of Kings' by Firdausī, *c.* 1000 CE) must as students with a master singer not only memorize passages from the epic, 'but the student must also copy and learn the *tumār*, which he receives from his teacher. This *tumār* is a story outline in prose of the episodes making up the stories he will tell.'[8] Nigel Phillips, in his study of the oral epic tradition of the Minangkabau of West Sumatra, mentions that in the predominantly oral tuition of singers, some used written sources when learning the epic. (1981: 13–14)

There can be no doubt about the interaction of oral and written transmission in many of the oral epic traditions that have stayed alive to this day or came to an end in the course of the twentieth century. It is, however, equally undeniable that the ideal case – oral performance in conjunction with oral transmission and oral composition – did and does exist and that it makes sense, when talking of oral tradition to take this case as the yardstick by which the variations and combinations of orality and literacy in specific situations are measured. When looking at different

aspects of oral epic poetry in the following chapters, the precise meaning of 'oral' in a given case will have to be discussed. At this point, it suffices to see the type of singer Milman Parry sought to record as the ideal case; it is positioned at the oral end of the oral-literate spectrum.

The Challenge of Native Classification

The definition of an epic becomes more complicated when we step outside the Western literary tradition and look at works that have been called epics in the oral traditions of Asia and Africa. René Wellek and Austin Warren have underlined the culture-specific character of genre categories:

> But we must not narrow 'genology' to a single tradition or doctrine. 'Classicism' was intolerant of, indeed unwitting of, other aesthetic systems, kinds, forms. Instead of recognizing the Gothic cathedral as a 'form', one more complex than the Greek temple, it found in it nothing but formlessness. So with genres. Every 'culture' has its genres: the Chinese, the Arabian, the Irish; there are primitive oral 'kinds'. Medieval literature abounded in kinds.
>
> (1963: 234)

But does this mean that genre categories do not apply across cultural boundaries? A well-known case is the controversy about the epic among Africanists. In her survey of oral literature in Africa, Ruth Finnegan covers a great number of genres and traditions, but not the epic. She only has a note on epic of two and a half pages, where she maintains that works that have been called 'epic' by scholars – as for instance the 'Lianja epic' of the Congo – are not epics, partly because they are in prose rather than in verse, partly, and more importantly, because prior to having been written down they were 'a very loosely related bundle of separate episodes, told on separate occasions and not necessarily thought of as one single work of art'. She ends by affirming that 'epic seems to be of remarkably little significance in African oral literature, and the *a priori* assumption that epic is the natural form for many non-literate peoples turns out here to have little support'.[9] Her contention has not found universal consent. A number of books on particular epics and epic traditions in Africa, most importantly in West Africa, but also in the area of the Congo, and on epic in Africa in general have been published since. As one Africanist puts it in the title of one of his publications, alluding to Ruth Finnegan's denial of the existence of epic in Africa: 'Yes, Virginia, There is an Epic in Africa'.[10]

The controversy hinges on an understanding of the genre term 'epic' in the Aristotelian tradition. Anthropologists like Bronislaw Malinowski and folklorists like Dan Ben-Amos, however, warn us that for the analysis of non-Western traditions, especially those where narrative and poetry are predominantly, if not exclusively, oral, native terms and ethnic categories

have to be employed. They show that criteria quite different from those enumerated above can be used in classifying verbal art. A well-known case is Malinowski's report on three types of narratives among the natives of the Trobriand Islands in the Solomon Sea: *kukwanebu*, stories which are believed (but not very seriously, as Malinowski adds) to have a beneficial effect on the newly planted crops, *libwogwo*, stories thought to be true, and *liliu*, sacred tales or myths. What distinguishes these types of narratives is not primarily their textual side, that is, the kind of story they tell, but rather their function and place in the life of the society in question. Malinowski makes this point repeatedly and insists that

> we can neither fully grasp the meaning of the text, nor the sociological nature of the story, nor the natives' attitude towards it and interest in it, if we study the narrative on paper. These tales live in the memory of man, in the way in which they are told, and even more in the complex interest which keeps them alive.
>
> (1926: 27)

Similar examples can be found in many regions of the world. According to Paul Radin, the Native American Ho-Chunk (Winnebago) distinguished between two types of narratives:

> Like most American Indian tribes, the Winnebago divided their prose narratives into two types: those that dealt with a past that was irretrievably gone and which belonged to the realm of things no longer possible or attainable by man or spirits; and those which dealt with the present workaday world. The first is called *waikan*, what-is-sacred, and the second *worak*, what-is-recounted. No *waikan* could be told in the summertime or, at least, when the snakes were above ground. *Waikan* could not end tragically. … The *worak*, in contrast, could be told at any time and had to end tragically.
>
> (1972: 118)

In a study of sung tales from the Papua New Guinea highlands, the editors state as main distinctive features of these tales, called by different names according to language and ethnic group (*pikono*, *bì té* and others), that they are vocal compositions, sung solo, without an accompanying instrument, generally improvised by a specialized singer-narrator, performed for the entertainment and sometimes instruction of the audience, which is expected to respond verbally to the tale; the tale is composed in heightened language; the story is 'not secret and is not considered "true", but the characters are placed in a real landscape of known places'. It is interesting to note that in these traditions performance aspects (solo singing, audience participation) play as important a role as narrative structure and poetic form.[11]

While it is essential to base a discussion of oral epics 'in the field' on native classification, any kind of comparative analysis presupposes a recognition of class identity between the items to be compared. And in order to formulate such class identity one needs a 'meta-terminology', which applies to more than one native tradition. That these terms might have different weight in different traditions and might have modifications that increase dissimilarity rather than similarity does not disqualify such an undertaking. The epic is a historical genre and, as far as we know, not a universal genre; similarly, the elements of such a meta-terminology need not be universal. They arise from specific speech forms and have to be tested as to their use in comparative analysis. I will discuss the question of how to identify an oral epic in largely divergent traditions by two examples (choosing Laches' rather than Socrates' method), one from Africa, the other from Central Asia.

An African Interlude

One of the scholars who have been active in collecting and translating African epics, Christiane Seydou, has specifically addressed the question of how to define the epic.[12] She takes the Occidental concept of 'epic' as her point of departure and then, on the basis of a comparison between two African oral traditions, argues for a set of nine parameters by which the genre is to be defined: (1) the sociological status of the artist, (2) the musical accompaniment, (3) the formal structure of the narrative, (4) its contents, (5) the mainspring of the action, (6) the style, (7) the effects of the style on the audience, (8) the behaviour of the audience, and (9) the function of the epic and of the epic performance.

The oral epic traditions selected are those of the Fulbe (Fulɓe, Peul, Fulani) in Mali and of the Fang in Gabon and Equatorial Guinea. The Fulbe do not only live in Mali, but also in other parts of West Africa, which explains why Fulbe epics have also been collected outside Mali. Their genre term for the oral epic is *hoddu*; this is also the word used for the instrument of epic performance, a plucked lute of three or four strings. The epic tradition of the Fulbe is very similar to that of the Bambara and other speakers of Mande languages in West Africa. The best known Mande epic is no doubt *Sunjata*, a legendary epic about the thirteenth-century founder of the empire of Mali, Sunjata Keita; it has been written down in a number of versions and been repeatedly translated and retold.[13] Christiane Seydou has highlighted the interpenetration of the oral traditions of the Fulbe and of the speakers of Mande languages, made all the easier through the bilinguality of epic singers:

> In this area [the Massina, a vast plain between Ségou and Timbuktu in Mali] it is incidentally no rarity that one and the same *griot* [epic singer], who is bilingual, performs Fulani or Bambara epics without