

Scharada Bail is currently working as an internet consultant, interested in cultural studies

**T**hings that squeak and rattle, that jump or whirl or spin, and eventually break. The streets of Indian cities are host to millions of salesmen. While most sell functional articles needed in urban homes, there are those who sell toys they have crafted themselves. These noisy, coloured, breakable objects have fascinated generations of children, but their continued availability is in question. As the effects of a technology driven culture begin to sweep into the farthest reaches of our country, and society, the existence of the individuals who make hand crafted toys becomes as fragile and precariously poised as their creations.

This was the starting point for a study of these toymakers, their lives, work and experience, the toys they make, the traditions that sustain them, and the market forces that threaten them. I undertook to study these toymakers through a sustained personal interaction with these people. This was to take place in a two year project, enabled by a grant from the India Foundation for the Arts, Bangalore. The project began on February 1, 2000. While the project is still in its preliminary stage, some discernible features can be shared here.

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While setting certain guidelines for the study to follow, such as ensuring its national coverage by visiting cities in diverse regions, I did not speculate about the eventual findings. I was conscious that I could be in for many surprises, both from the standpoint of personal experience, as well as from a more ideological perspective. In effect, I attempted to be prepared (or unprepared) for anything.

The very first thing that becomes apparent in the lives of these toymakers is that the rhythms of their work are tied to festivals, melas and carnivals, and other events with strong religious overtones. One is most likely to encounter a good gathering of them, with a variety of toys on display, at the chariot festivals of the Kapaleeswar and Parthasarathy temples in Chennai, than on an average evening on Marina beach.

At Varanasi, the *Chaith Navadurga* days were being celebrated in April, just prior to *Ram Navami*. These are nine days devoted to *Durga*, similar to the *Navaratri* that falls in a later part of the year. There are significant *Devi* temples, both in Varanasi, and in surrounding areas, where fairs were held for all the nine days. In the city itself, the fair venue changed to a different temple everyday – the first day was at the Shailputri temple, the second day was at the Brahmacharini temple on the Lalita Ghat, and so on.

An itinerant community of vendors, astrologers, instant *mehndi* printers, fast food hawkers, balloon and toy sellers moves every day, and tries to earn what is possible from the hordes of local pilgrims. Apart from this, famous temples like the Vindhyaivasini Devi near Mirzapur, and the Kashi Viswanath temple also have a sizeable population of regular street sellers, some of whom are toy makers.

The business calendar of the toy makers was similarly found to be tied to religion in Hyderabad, too. All the people interviewed named the Mankali temple festival, *Diwali*, and *Dussehra* as their main sales periods. At Allahabad, which I visited for a day's scouting trip after *Ram Navami*, the grounds around the sacred *sangam* area had just been vacated by sellers and craftsmen who had returned to their villages after camping in the area for ten days.

There is a very dynamic version of secularism at work among the toymakers who sell their wares at religious festivals. It is a deep appreciation of another's religion, even if one's own faith is different. This is in evidence at each place. While Mohammed Tyab, and his sons Gulab Mohammad and Banarasi at Varanasi, shared with me what Dashashwamedh Ghat, Kashi Viswanath, and the Hindu festivals meant to them and their work, it was Azmath Khan, Asif and Mohammed Khan who expressed similar views in Hyderabad. At Mylapore, Chennai, the most ingenious toys at the Kapaleeswar Chariot Festival were made by Abraham of Vyasarpadi.

While religious practice as it exists in people's homes and hearts sustains the efforts of the toymakers, its glamourised projection by the media has also brought them dividends. In many conversations, the looming effect of films and TV became apparent. *Serials like Mahabharat, Ramayana, and the Sword of Tipu Sultan have helped us by making tinsel bow and arrows, Hanumanji's gada and tinsel swords very popular*, says Azmath Khan. His wife, five children, and a host of extended family members survive on these shiny weapons, artefacts of ages gone by, that have suddenly acquired a modern currency through their being featured on TV.

Elsewhere too, the film and TV connection is referred to. *My ustad ( the man who taught him the craft) had sold his toys to film producers on numerous occasions*, says Mohammed Tyab. He remembers a Sanjeev Kumar film in which an entire scene was decorated with the paper windmills that his *ustad* had made. In Hyderabad, balloon seller Shaik Baba counts the film industry as a major client, often requiring hundreds of balloons for a few minutes of film. However, the sobering flip side of this clientele is that it can sometimes leave the impoverished seller deprived of his due.

*The beach is my shop. My toys are stuck in the sand, attracting passers by with their movement. On more than one occasion, film crews have come, shot their scenes against my windmills, grabbed a few, then gone away, without giving me anything* says Nagalingam, of Elliot's beach, Chennai.

Since toymakers come from a social background that often precludes high levels of education or formal vocational training, many have tried their hand at other things before settling into this way of life. Some have been watchmen, some painters, balloon sellers, labourers. At some point in their lives, there is a shift, wherein they decide to take their survival literally into the skill of their own hands. As one holds a fragile contraption of paper, glue, paint, cardboard and tinsel in one's hand, it is difficult to imagine the brave leap it must have meant for someone to entrust their own, and their family's survival to it.

And yet, it seems to have worked for most of them. A fierce self respect, a feeling of pride that they can choose to lie down when they wish, that they have no critical and carping superiors, is found in conversations with them.

They have received help along the way. Although only two of the people I met have ever been offered institutional help, (and both are craftsmen tied to an identifiable tradition – Laxmi Nath Lakhera, lacquer toy maker from Rewa, and Mohammed Husain, wooden toymaker from Hyderabad) most can point to at least one other person who has guided them, taught them skills, set them on the path to being their own masters.

Undoubtedly the most depressed, a pessimist who dare not even dream for his children, Arun Kumar Jaiswal of Varanasi fashions fearsome looking crocodiles out of newspaper, clay spindles, black and red ink, and string. As you share his time and ask him about his life, his eyes often fill up behind his spectacles as he recounts how his own parents have cut him out of the family plastics business. But even he admits receiving help from a toymaker friend from Calcutta, the man who first showed him how to make the crocodile. Arun Jaiswal began as a salesman of these toys, till he learnt to skilfully make them himself. Since then, he has added to his repertoire through his own ingenuity. He makes parachutes out of sticks, plastic packets, rubber bands and string.

The crocodile is very authentic, and succeeds in scaring the unwary. As an ethnic artefact, it has deep roots. Similar creations were undoubtedly present in the folk toys of several generations back. By imbibing his skills from the Calcutta toymaker, Arun Jaiswal has demonstrated the reach of urban folklore – its extension through the transfer of survival skills. Just below the surface of the global culture currently sweeping our metros, many such examples exist.

For some, the folk identity is very much visible on the surface, it has not been rubbed away by the anonymity of sharing living space with a million poor in some part of a city. The most touching encounter has been with the poorest toymakers of all – the gypsies or *pardis* that live under a bus shelter next to the Paradise cinema flyover in Hyderabad. An entire community sleeps

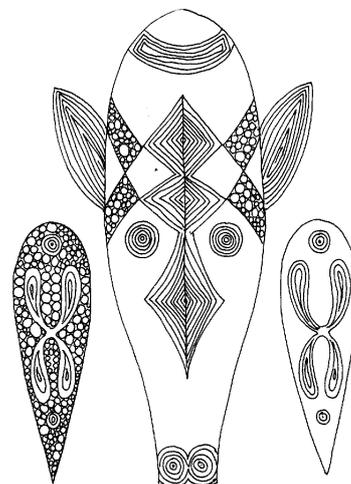
several months of the year under the stars around this bus shelter. Ragged, unkempt, presenting the classic picture of the poor and dispossessed, these people speak a mixture of Gujarati, Kannada, Marathi, Hindi and Urdu. They belong to Gulbarga, in Karnataka.

The oldest among them, a militant old man with few teeth intact, remembers his mother and father coming as labourers to Hyderabad to work on the dams being built by the Nizam. Perhaps that was the beginning for their annual migration to Hyderabad from their homes, he says. But why do they choose to live like this? It is a sad sight indeed to see their infants in the most abject conditions next to brightly coloured plastic balls, and shiny bow and arrows for sale.

Yet, among the subjects themselves, there does not seem to be much bemoaning their lot. When they leave home, they do not put down roots, they say. This suffices till they go back to Gulbarga. Children being deprived and missing an education do not disturb them unduly. But ask them what they miss about home, and they turn emotional. The womenfolk, with little urging raise their voices in a song praising the Goddess of their particular village. The oldest man joins in a long, quavering shout that is reminiscent of a Gujarat peasant.

These are clearly people outside the pale of all institutional help and intervention. Their future even as urban toymakers seems extremely precarious. Will such skills as they have acquired be enough to sustain the whole community? And then, as you express some of these thoughts aloud, one of the men says reassuringly, *We come under the Scheduled Tribe list*, whatever that means to him.

Walking the road with toymakers in Indian cities has already brought me much to think about. Most of the work under this project is still ahead of me, but in the little I have seen and experienced are some of the themes that define life in urban India. We know about the displacement of people, the gradual fading away of folk skills, the pervasive influence of the media. But seeing it in human faces – is both more profound, and more painful.



## FOLK TOYS: ALWAYS ROOM FOR PLAY

Deeya Nayar is Editor, Tulika Publishers, Chennai

**I**s it the charm of creating, the earthy allure of the unsophisticated, or just the novelty of something different that makes simple homespun toys so fascinating? Difficult to pinpoint, but there is clearly an enduring quality to folk style toys which has ensured their survival for hundreds of years. Their origin can be traced back five thousand years to the Indus Valley civilisation of Mohenjodaro and Harappa. Excavations there have produced clay toys, some with moveable heads, some with wheels, remarkably innovative.

Endured so far, yes. How much longer they will last is a question that worries toymakers themselves, as well as people and organisations who are working to keep these skills alive. Flooded as the markets are with machine made toys, traditional streetside ones seem to be drowning, gasping for breath. The irony is that the competition is not always from terribly superior products. Some of the less expensive factory made plastic toys are dismally shoddy. For with the unchecked cutting of trees, traditional toymakers are finding it increasingly difficult to obtain raw material such as special woods and lac directly from forests. They are now forced to buy them from the market, which shoots up costs and makes them less accessible as regular toys for children to play with. At the other end of the scale, the urban affluent who can afford them tend to display them as decorative pieces of rural handicraft - their idea of toys would perhaps be on the lines of Lego sets, the latest remote-controlled cars or other hi-tech toys.

The latter are probably inevitable in today's urban world, where the ubiquitous chip holds centre stage. But strange as it may seem, technology-based toymakers the world over (including toy-giant Mattel of America) are now pulling in the reins and doing a rethink after sales figures have registered a steady decline. The toys that are still hot-selling items even in the techno-savvy west are the old-fashioned ones or board games, where play value is high.

The message is clear: a child's imagination has to be stimulated to hold attention in play. Open-ended toys encourage this, while toys with a built-in agenda, too much of flashing lights and gadgetry can often choke it. As Christopher Byrne, editor of the newsletter, *Toy Report*, says: *The essential nature of play occurs in the child's mind.*

This is where folk toys score. Their very lack of sophistication is fertile breeding ground for fantasy. Discussing productive play for children at the

conference *Playing for Keeps 2000: A Conference on the Future of Play* held this year at Wheelock College, Boston, America, experts categorically stressed the importance of creative play. It was observed that the sense of competence and confidence it fosters spills over into academic learning and their ability to cope with life in general.

The case here is not for glorifying traditional folk toys to the complete exclusion of all else; rather, it is to awaken us to their value and correct the balance which is increasingly swinging against them. Or we could lose a precious heritage of craft skills, and also some of the principles buried under the seeming simplicity of the toys. Isn't it amazing, for instance, how rural craftspeople seem to have always known the importance of using environment-friendly and biodegradable materials, much advocated now after extensive research?

Equally interesting is how rural toymakers create mobile toys that work on proper scientific principles. Professor Sudarshan Khanna highlights this aspect. A designer from the National Institute of Design who has made a lifelong study of Dynamic Toys - the fun ones which spin or whistle or fly - he finds them both ingenious and educative, making a child aware of the elementary laws of physics through imaginative play. *When I looked around for examples of the creative and intelligent use of everyday materials, the perfect example seemed to be folk toys made by artisans and sold at fairs all over India*, he says.

*Use of everyday materials:* this is perhaps the key to the relevance of folk toys in any age or region. Toymakers of yore used what they found around them to transform into imaginative playthings - earth, wood, rags, straw, the juice of local plants and herbs to colour, the paste of tamarind seeds as glue, and so on. Adaptiveness is thus inherent in the folk style, and it is this flexibility that must be utilised in reinventing the tradition to keep it alive and relevant in a modern, urban milieu.

To demonstrate this point Professor Khanna and others have reconstructed several traditional toys using *everyday materials* easily available to today's city children, while explaining what makes the toy tick; that is, the simple scientific principles involved. Arvind Gupta - an engineer who has devoted himself to popularising science for children and worked with organisations such as *Ekalavya* - goes a step further. *It is an irony of modern consumerism that junk products are packed in tough cartons . . . These new raw materials offer innumerable possibilities for use in low-cost science experiments and in making dynamic toys*, he says.

And sure enough, compiled in his book, *Little Toys* are a number of engaging creations made primarily out of urban junk. An old cigarette packet is made into a mouth organ, based on Bernoulli's principle that

when air blows at high speed between two strips it creates a low pressure zone; this makes the strips vibrate which produces sound. Using a film roll case, thick straw, wire and card he fashions a *Cranky Doll* which jumps up and down when the handle of a little mechanism is rotated - like the pistons of a car engine that move up and down. The wind from a ceiling fan pushes a *Small Sail Car* (whose sails are of used postcard, wheels of plastic buttons) away each time it is pulled close with a string - never-ending fun for children, which also shows them the power of wind, why it can be harnessed to produce electricity. The children of Mirambika School in Delhi actually made and tested these creations for five years. They were also serialised in the magazine *Science Reporter*.

*Tulika Publishers*, too, has on its forthcoming list a book to rouse children's interest in such toys. *Simple Wonders: Indian Toys and Tales* was conceived by sculptor Paramasivam, who was fascinated by folk toys since he was a child. He gives step-by-step drawings and instructions on how children can make a range of clever toys using scraps - a piece of cardboard, a bit of bamboo, and old tin can . . . Just as folk toys encourage children to imagine and invent, so do stories, and his wife and professional storyteller Cathy Spagnoli weaves one around each toy to further stimulate creative juices.

The special experience of creating and learning skills / lessons through play is one of the most valuable bequests of the tradition of folk toys. In its project *Utsah*, *Chetna* (an Ahmedabad-based NGO) made a pleasant discovery of the positive effects of making and using folk puppets on disabled children. It seemed to work wonders as a creative medium which developed their latent capacities - as was pointed out by the group at Wheelock. It gave them a chance to express their feelings and function in a group while developing the confidence of learning skills such as drawing, stitching and embroidering. *Chetna*, whose main aim is educating women on health awareness, has also found these puppets a useful medium when sensitive or private issues like sex education or contraception are discussed with shy, hesitant participants, or for use in hospitals for explaining health and hygiene.

The strength of folk toys, then, is their creative base. Not being mass-churned out of factories in fixed moulds, the maker is free to improvise for whichever purpose, in any cultural context. To imagine that modern toys have forced their folk predecessors to become anachronisms is a misconception. However, we have to make a conscious effort to propagate them, as is being done, for example, by *Sutradhar* of Bangalore who source and retail toys from villages. Another organisation also based in Bangalore is *Mrichakattika*, a co-operative society which trains women in terracotta

toymaking. A designer works with these women, to teach the basics and to encourage innovation. *Naika*, Delhi, also trains craftsmen who produce some toys but specialises in ornaments, costumes, masks and accessories connected with folk theatre.

Training craftsmen and providing them visibility are vital boost for traditional toymakers. It upholds their art while encouraging them to experiment and adjust to the changing culture of rapid urbanisation. The onus is now on us to recognise the potential of folk toys, the strength behind their continuing relevance and their exciting potential in diverse fields and cultures. We as consumers must actually buy them for what they are, use them as toys for our children to play with everyday - not remand them to emporia and showcases, or to history.





## Comments

### TEXTUALISING THE SIRI EPIC

John Miles Foley is Director, Centre for Studies in Oral Tradition, University of Missouri, Columbia

Publication of *Siri epic volumes* marks an important stage in the study of Indian oral epics. In the last issue of *Indian Folklife* newsletter we published an article by Peter Claus hoping to initiate a discussion on this vital topic. Peter Claus' article referred to John Foley's review published in FF Network For The Folklore Fellows, No.17, June 1999, Pp.13-23. We reproduce John Foley's article here with the author's permission in order to make oral epics central to our scholarship, research, fieldwork projects and debate. In the context of *Siri epic volumes* Indian folklorists may have to refocus their attention on already existing scholarship on Indian oral epics as well. NFSC's publication division has called for manuscripts on the theme, *Identity and oral narratives*; its public programming division plans to conduct a festival on the theme *oral narratives and string instruments*. Reproducing John Foley's article furthers our efforts to achieve coherence between our programmes also. We invite articles / reviews on Brenda Beck's *Annamar epic*, Gene Roghair's *Palnaadu epic*, Stuart Blackburn's (ed.) *Oral epics in India* and Joe Miller's recent study of *Rajasthani oral epics* (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, UMI dissertation service). More than internationalising the genre for the purposes of comparative analyses, the wealth of oral epics in India holds the key to the creative processes communities are engaged in to construct and perfect the role of memory in shaping Indian folklife. Irawati Karve's imaginative interpretation of *Mahabharata* laid the foundations for finding the ecological basis of social conflict in ancient India. Similar approaches can be extended to oral epics also. Komal Kothari has always been arguing for viewing Rajasthani oral epics as great chronicles of knowledge systems evolved through intelligence of the people living in desert. Several directions, approaches and interpretations of oral epics are needed to excavate the hidden foundations of Indian civilisation. We currently solicit the participation of all the scholars to use this forum offered by *Indian Folklife* to debate the dynamics of Indian oral epics.— Editor]

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**P**erforming the *Siri Epic* took six days; during that period Gopala Naika, a possession priest and agriculturalist from Machar in southern Karnataka, India, composed a narrative of 15,683 lines, only five lines shorter than the most magisterial of Western epics, Homer's *Iliad*. That performance was acoustically recorded and videotaped by a team of Finnish and Tulu researchers and is presented here in its entirety. The appearance of Naika's poem in a bilingual, facing-page format ideal for consumption by specialist and nonspecialist alike is a triumph in itself, opening a window onto a world of living oral epic unglimped by many contemporary scholars and, more specifically, providing an opportunity to become acquainted with a moving and dynamic mythic universe and performance tradition that deserve attention in their own right. But the richness of the experience available in these three volumes is deeper yet. Also included are complete histories of the eight-year fieldwork project that led to this performance and its eventual codification, a cultural and religious context for its reception, and an evaluative chronicle of eleven other fieldwork projects and resultant publications on oral epic from various parts of the world. In discussing a few salient aspects of the three-volume

series, I will naturally have a few queries or criticisms to bring forward, based on my own experience with South Slavic oral epic (both from the Milman Parry Collection and in my own fieldwork), as well as with oral-derived epic in ancient Greek and medieval English. But there is no question in my mind that the composite presentation of the *Siri Epic* in FFC 264-66 constitutes the single most thorough and most important resource of its kind. As an entrée into the complex, resonant experience of an oral epic tradition, it is unmatched.

One caveat before turning to my remarks. It is a commonplace in this genre of critical commentary that one cannot begin to do justice to the work under consideration in so limited a space. This is especially true for the *Siri Epic* series, of course. Rather than range widely and shallowly, then, I will be concentrating on a few prominent features of the first volume (*Textualising*) and then directing the remainder of this review where I believe it most clearly belongs - to the epic itself as viewed within a comparative context. I leave additional remarks and emphasis to other reviewers and, at longer range, to the research and scholarship that will doubtless arise in spirited conversation with the entire project.

*Textualising the Siri Epic* (FFC 264) comprises four parts: *The Enigma of Long Epic* (A), which amounts to a comparative poetics of oral epic; *Textualisation of Oral Epics: Antecedents* (B), a history of fieldwork and publication; *Textualisation of Oral Epics: The Present Case* (C), focused on Gopala Naika's performance in its traditional cultural context; and *The Siri Epic: A Synopsis* (D), a helpful overview of the main action of the tale. Early in section A, Honko rapidly establishes some of the most crucial dimensions of the frame within which the 1990 performance took place. We learn of the singer's illiteracy and, more significantly, the positive advantage that his devotion to oral tradition entails. We start to get a sense of the bard's religious status as the leader of the local *Siri* possession-cult, a connection that enlivens every last fibre of the song from individual lines and phrases to the overall performance arena.<sup>1</sup> Not least, we read that it was Gopala Naika himself who initiated the textualisation of his epic, first by declaring *his willingness to dictate the epic* (264: 13; see further C.6) and then by following through with actual dictation in 1985-86, a prior textualisation of 8,538 lines that Honko labels *Homeric* because of the medium in which it was composed and taken down. In this and many other ways, the first of the three volumes enlarges and productively complicates prevailing views of long epic. In the process it weans us away from the parochial examples of Western narrative and provides firsthand evidence that oral epics can be and are created wholly without the technology of writing - in a word, that oral composition is a much more complex and many-sided process than has heretofore been appreciated.

## DEFINING THE EPIC

One step on the path toward a more realistically complex view of oral epic - an awareness of their differences as well as similarities - is the formulation of a definition that opens the door to as many narratives as possible while still maintaining the outlines of a generic model that will support comparison. Just such a comparative poetics is at the basis of Foley, *Traditional Oral Epic: The Odyssey, Beowulf, and the Serbo-Croatian Return Song* (Berkeley: UCP, 1990), which advocates attention to incongruities as well as congruities in prosody, phraseology, and narrative patterning. Here is Honko's definition (264: 28):

*Epics are great narratives about exemplars, originally performed by specialised singers as superstories which excel in length, power of expression and significance of content over other narratives and function as a source of identity representations in the traditional community or group receiving the epic.*

As a test of this perspective, let us apply it to two well-studied traditions, one of them ancient and the other contemporary. Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* certainly fulfill the first criterion, with *Achilleus* and *Odysseus* (as well as many other characters) serving as exemplars. Their contemporary expressive power and significance are manifest from the literature and commentaries of the ancient world, where, according to Xenophanes of Colophon, *from the beginning all have learned according to Homer*. Plato's philosophical writings, even as they often contest against Homer for dominance in worldview, constantly cite the epics as a cultural encyclopedia. The grip exerted by the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* on the evolution of European culture - and, very importantly, on the concept of epic itself - has been obvious for centuries. Although our knowledge of *specialised singers* in ancient Greece is fragmentary and sometimes contradictory, and although the rest of the epic tradition has vanished except for a few lines and summaries here and there, Honko's definition generally fits what we know about Homer and his tradition. When we add the general consensus that the ancient Greek poems

emerged from an oral tradition, though again in what particular manner we cannot say, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* can be meaningfully approached via Honko's model.

How about the living tradition of South Slavic Moslem epic?<sup>2</sup> Once again there is little doubt about the role of exemplars; although the cast of characters from the glory days of the Ottoman Empire will be less familiar to Western ears than the celebrated figures of Greek mythology, a wide array of heroes and heroic women are prominent in the songs. Moreover, in this well collected tradition, the identity of the songs as *superstories* is more evident and compelling than it can ever be in the long-dead, partially extant traditions of the ancient and medieval worlds. The performances are complete in themselves, of course, but because of the

resonant context in which they take place, they always imply more than they denote. In a sense they have no real boundaries, no absolute textual singularity, just as they are not repeated syllable for syllable in every version. Both their position in the overall network of oral epic tradition and their multiformity, a quality to which Honko returns again and again in these volumes, are fundamental aspects of their identity as *superstories*. Performed by specialised bards, called *guslari*, the Moslem songs demonstrate considerable if not overwhelming length (an average of perhaps 2500 lines, though master-singer Avdo Medjedovic's performances reached 13,000-18,000 lines on two occasions), a power of expression that has been shown to be highly idiomatic and foundational for its interlocutors, and a significance of content that can be traced to the role of professional singers in Ottoman courts and until recently mirrored in the continuing activity of singers

and audiences in Bosnia and Montenegro. Even the modern (and decidedly nonprofessional) singers of tales in these regions, whose first allegiance was to practical occupations such as farming, craftsmanship, and small-scale trade, preserved the heritage of South Slavic Moslem epic, keeping its encoded history and group-centered identity alive for themselves and their audiences. Once again, with allowance made for the

## The Siri Epic

as performed by Gopala Naika



Lauri Honko in collaboration with  
Chinnappa Gowda, Anneli Honko and Viveka Rai  
Part I

ACADEMIA SCIENTIARUM FENNICA

Lauri Honko in collaboration with Chinnappa Gowda, Anneli Honko and Viveka Rai, *The Siri Epic as performed by Gopala Naika. Part I. Folklore Fellows' Communications No. 265. Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia (Academia Scientiarum Fennica), 1998. lxx + 492 pp. Hard (ISBN 951-41-0814-0), FIM 250,-Soft (ISBN 951-41-0815-9), FIM 225,-*



idiosyncrasies of the individual tradition, Honko's model applies reasonably well to this living epic tradition.

## EPIC REGISTER AND EPIC IDIOLECT

With such parameters in mind, Honko goes on to explore numerous aspects of performance and composition that deserve much more extended commentary than can be offered in the present format. I will concentrate here on three of them that are of primary importance for comparative studies: *epic idiolect and epic register* (A.7), modes of performance and dictation versus singing (A.9-10), and the concept of the *mental text* (A.12).

With the terms register and idiolect, Honko establishes perspectives on composition and reception that promise greater fidelity to oral epic because they promote the understanding of its performed instances on their own terms. (On the application of these terms to various traditions and genres, see e.g. Foley, *Singer of Tales in Performance*, pp. 49-53, 82-92.) Honko is careful to explain that he uses the term *register* in Dell Hymes's sense of *major speech styles associated with recurrent types of situations*, thus identifying a specialised epic language that the singer learns to speak and in which the audience also (and crucially) gains a fluency. By transacting the verbal exchange within this medium, then, *what the performance brings about is essentially a community of reception* (264: 64). Within the shared dialect of the epic register, Honko also locates an individualized level of traditional language, the *idiolect*. Just as speakers of everyday language in any society share a dialect but develop their own personal versions of that more generalised language, so the individual epic singer carves out his own working language from the more generalised epic dialect. By directing our attention toward idiolect, and construing it as a flexible, multiform linguistic instrument, Honko is able to have the best of both worlds: he can speak of the traditional structure and meaning that are so much a part of the Siri Epic context, and he can describe Gopala Naika's individual (and by definition inimitable) creation within that tradition.

This stereoscopic view - paying due attention to both individual and tradition - was precisely the original intent of applying such concepts to oral traditional performance. For further evidence of the necessarily paired contributions of individual and tradition, see Foley, *Individual Poet and Epic Tradition: Homer as Legendary Singer, Arethusa*, 31 (1998): 149-78 and, more generally, Foley, *Homer's Traditional Art* (University Park: Penn. State Univ. Press, 1999).

## MODES OF PERFORMANCE

Especially informative for scholars whose main research area centers on Western epic is the discussion of modes of performance (A.9). Whereas

many conceive of oral epic (on the model of Homer) as an extended, single-channel narration by the singer, Honko points out that worldwide epic must be more broadly conceived, taking into account such variations as the presence or absence of musical accompaniment, prose and poetry, dance, group rendition, drama, and other performative modes. Moreover, the mode may shift within a single performance, and the *same* epic may be realised in numerous different ways. As an example, he details four distinct modes of Siri Epic performance: *monovoiced singing with slow body sway and linear narration of the epic* (264: 76); a dialogue between the main singer and his male assistants; *the polyphonic overlapping solo singing by the male and female singers without any observable synchronising of expression* (264: 77); and alternating performance by two or three female cult members with back-channel reinforcement by the rest of the group. All of these may be responsibly and accurately understood as the Siri Epic, but each of them engages a different context and produces a different result. Such is the natural heterogeneity of oral epic in this Dravidian tradition, a quality that should encourage us to press for plurality in our idea of oral epic, no matter what our particular specialties may be, and perhaps to be aware of signals within oral-derived texts that may point in similar directions.

One is reminded, for example, of the poet's invocations before the epic action begins (Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*; also the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf*), of the interruptions of his story in the *Iliad* (before the *Catalogue of Ships and Men* in Book 2; thanks to Aaron Tate for this example) and the medieval English *Andreas* (lines 1478-91), or of the vocative address of the swineherd Eumaios in the *Odyssey* (e.g., 14.55), where the poet seems to speaking to one of his characters (on which subject, cf. Plato's *dialogue, Ion*). Modes and performance styles of various kinds may persist into written texts as signals to be activated during the process of reception (see Foley, *The Singer of Tales in Performance*, chap. 3).

Just as an epic may be performed differently, so too it can be recorded in quite diverse media environments: dictation and singing. Here Honko's analysis of the two possibilities via his research team's experience with the Siri Epic plays out with special significance (A.10), and not only because of the light it sheds on the performance at hand. Since Albert Lord initially broached the subject in 1953, claiming a superiority in length and quality for the dictated text, Homerists and other scholars have jostled over the nature of ancient and medieval texts - artifacts that could not have been fashioned except by dictation for technological reasons - and the comparability of acoustically recorded and dictated performances from various parts of the world. Contrary to Lord's findings, Honko demonstrates the artistic and structural superiority of the sung Siri Epic, and traces it to the greater elaboration of narrative multiforms in the

sung as opposed to the dictated versions. As a parallel Honko notes that *Brenda Beck found the dictated version of the Tamil epic... contentwise and stylistically impoverished and much shorter than the sung version* (264: 82). To some extent, the question of sung versus dictated will rest on the individual properties of the given oral epic tradition (the variety of modes and performance styles, for example) and the particular circumstances that characterise the time and place of its recording (wax tablets, vellum, or paper; one or a team of scribes or various methods of acoustic and video recording). But Honko's hard evidence makes it clear that we should not automatically privilege the medium nearest to our everyday experience. In the Tulu case, the esteemed technology of writing is a positive impediment to the best epic performance.

## MENTAL TEXT

In section A.12 we come to one of Honko's most suggestive and powerful concepts, the so-called *mental text*. It is also destined to be one of the most controversial features of his impressive composite theory - not, I must stress, because of its considerable explicative potential but rather because of the basic terminology employed. Working from the ideas of register, idiolect, and *pool of tradition* (espec. A8), he starts by shifting the perspective from the collective tradition, as instanced in song-performances by a variety of bards, to the individual performer. This redistribution of emphasis is apparent in the following summary of what the mental text contains:

... (1) *storylines*, (2) *textual elements*, i.e., *episodic patterns*, *images of epic situations*, *multiforms*, etc., and (3) *their generic rules of reproduction as well as* (4) *contextual frames such as remembrances of earlier performances, yet not as a haphazard collection of traditional knowledge but, in the case of distinct epics of the active repertoire, a prearranged set of elements internalised by the individual singer.* (264: 94.)

Few would argue with the gist of this description. *Storylines* correspond to the story-patterns and thematic sequences of oral-formulaic theory; what he calls *textual elements* are mirrored in various approaches to folklore and oral tradition; and *rules for reproduction* have been suggested as a way to rationalise repeated items as the products of a rule-governed process. (Cf. the concept of traditional rules as described in Foley, *Traditional Oral Epic*, chs. 3, 5, 8.) Once the transfer from collective tradition to individual singer is made, the organising role of *contextual frames* becomes an inevitability. With these sound analytic principles it is hard to argue.

But one can argue with the choice of the critical term *text*. With all of its virtually inescapable overtones of fixity, literacy, and the technology of writing, text seems a risky label to employ in describing so central, and

intangible, a concept. Given how much has to be overcome in pressing *text* into service for what may seem a counterintuitive purpose, would it not have been easier to use a less loaded word? On the one hand, I understand and admire Honko's strategy: he seeks to explain the Siri Epic from this performance outward, through the composition of a single bard who harnesses a traditional register to his own idiolectal purposes. He seeks to show how the pool of tradition has taken shape within the mind of Gopala Naika, and his theoretical approach succeeds brilliantly in opening the epic to appreciation on its own terms. My only criticism is the choice of the term *text*, which presents a problem in reception for folklorists and general readers alike.

Section B of *Textualising the Siri Epic* begins with a discussion of Elias Lönnrot and the Finnish Kalevala, and continues with outlines of ten additional projects: the *Manas* epic and Wilhelm Radloff, the *Mohave* epic and Alfred Kroeber, the *South Slavic epic* and Milman Parry and Albert Lord, the *Sunjata epic* and Gordon Innes, the *Anggun Nan Tungga* epic and Nigel Phillips, the *Annanmaar* epic and Brenda Beck, the *Palnaadu* epic and Gene Roghair, the *Son-Jara* epic and Charles Bird and John Johnson, the *Siirat Bani Hilaal* epic and Susan Slyomovics, and the *Paabuujii* epic and John Smith. Each episode in the larger tale of oral epic projects includes comments on the idiosyncrasies of the given performance tradition and the circumstances of its collection, and offers evaluative consideration of the conclusions drawn by the investigator. This section needs little comment; by presenting a meticulous and fair-minded account of these other fieldwork projects on oral epic, Honko has compiled a unique resource that will undoubtedly prove extremely useful in itself even as it acts as a ready companion to the Siri Epic documented in these volumes.

For the record, I note that, contrary to the claim made here (264: 187), the Parry Collection's major strength has always been the epic genre in *South Slavic*. Women's songs (*zenske pjesme*) are quite numerous, it is true, but they are normally extremely short (in the range of 10-30 lines) and entirely lyric (non-narrative) in nature. The hundreds of epics collected in 1933-35 and 1950-51 from six geographically distinct epic centers in the former Yugoslavia, on the other hand, are more than sufficient to provide a rich, multiform context for individual singers, individual regions, and so on; see the full accounting in Matthew W. Kay, *The Index of the Milman Parry Collection 1933-35: Heroic Songs, Conversations, and Stories* (New York: Garland, 1995). In addition, the extended conversations with *guslari*, conducted by Parry's native assistant Nikola Vujnovic (himself an epic singer), help the investigator toward what Honko calls a *thick corpus* (264: 39, 512-13).



## EPIC ARCHAEOLOGY

Section C combines a rich cultural contextualisation of the epic performance with an insider's history of the fieldwork. Instead of attempting to survey the twenty separate parts of this section, I will focus on one activity that links context and fieldwork: what Honko and his team call *epic archaeology* (C.10). On the practical level, the two-day pause in Gopala Naika's performance, necessary to help the bard heal a throat and vocal apparatus overextended by singing, presented an opportunity to explore the dimensions of myth and reality in the Siri Epic. The team had already become well aware that the epic story was not simply entertainment or a reflection of ritual, but living truth for its practitioners. As Honko puts it (264: 322),

*It was not a matter of ideological stance or mythical narrative only but the continuous construction of a tangible world in which you as a Siri-devotee or Kumara-devotee could, with the help of your prayer and epic song, touch and move the heroes-turned-into-gods and summon them to your festival, where in turn these could occupy your body and use it as their vehicle in the human sphere making you, a human being, a true Siri or Kumara for a transient moment.*

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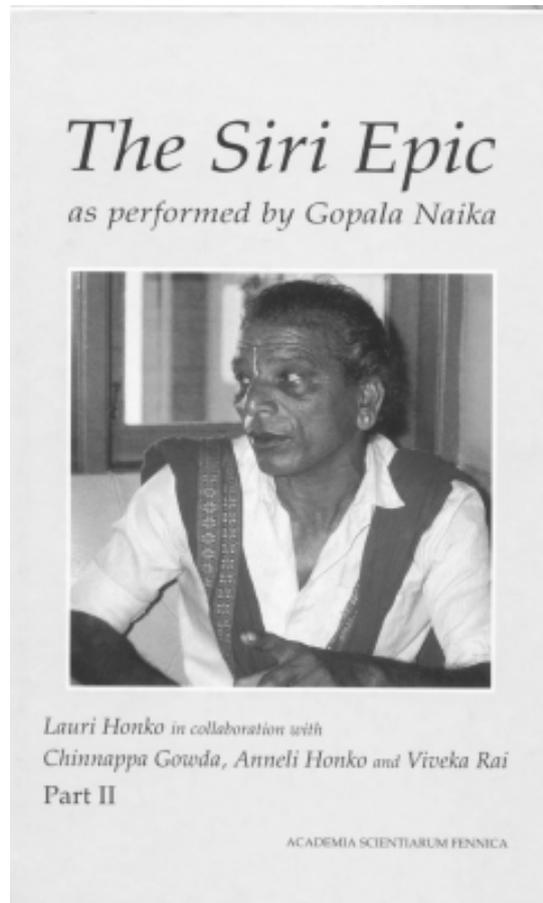
This amounts to participation or epic co-creation at a much deeper level than Western epics seem to license, touching the sphere of religious identity in a personally important way. One aspect of epic archaeology was then the realisation that the Siri Epic functions for those who perform and listen to it as a recurring rite of passage between two worlds, a retraceable path leading toward direct communication with divinity, a means by which gods enter the earthly realm and possess willing participants.

Moreover, this entry and possession constitutes not symbolic but literal truth. The events of the epic were considered historical, and the places where they occurred geographically real. The researchers were thus able to visit locations said to be those mentioned in the epic, bringing along with them the singer Gopala Naika, who had never before visited the actual sites himself.

One example was the *fairly large, quiet pond called kandadi kaaya and known as the place where Siri took her bath and washed clothes* (264: 325). This modest body of water had taken on a legendary character as a taboo site, so that neither fishing nor bathing was permitted; its depth could not be measured and people said it never dried up. Local people even pointed out a particular tree near the pond's edge as marking the spot where Siri gave birth to Sonne. In certain ways the more-than-mythic geography associated with the Siri narrative resembles the system of Western Apache place-names, which, far from simply indexing this or that topographical feature, encode traditional stories as embedded and emergent implications of the names. (See Keith Basso, *Western Apache Language and Culture: Essays in Linguistic Anthropology* (Tucson: UAP, 1990), pp. 138-73.)

In both cases, mythic history is mapped onto real territory, which in turn takes on sacred dimensions. Epic archaeology also culminated in increased awareness of another kind of context: the non-epic genres that subtend various aspects of the Siri story. Honko mentions a host of traditional forms that populate the epic universe: in addition to place-names, he identifies *belief legends, aetiological narratives, historical legends, prayers and incantations, proverbs and phrases, omens and taboos, rituals and customs* (264: 322) and the like, all of which cluster around the epic but were not part of the core narration as performed by Gopala Naika in 1990 and presented in these volumes. Such ancillary sources, some directly linked to geography and some not, are clearly important threads in the overall fabric of the Siri story, and their mention highlights the dangers inherent in isolating the epic performance from its natural context. Likewise, the whole networked constellation

of genres begs the question of how to deal with oral-derived traditional texts from the ancient and medieval worlds, where there is no opportunity for ethnographic research to establish a *thick corpus*. At the very least, this aspect of epic archaeology should underline the recognised fact that traditional genres leak; that is, there is more interplay among and interpenetration between different genres than our analytical practices customarily



Lauri Honko in collaboration with Chinnappa Gowda, Anneli Honko and Viveka Rai, *The Siri Epic as performed by Gopala Naika. Part II. Folklore Fellows' Communications No. 266. Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia (Academia Scientiarum Fennica), 1998. x + 400 pp. Hard (ISBN 951-41-0814-0), FIM 185,- Soft (ISBN 951-41-0815-9), FIM 160,-*

assume. If a traditional phrase belonging to an Old English riddle turns up in *Beowulf*, if a story-pattern associated with the *Odyssey* also underlies the Homeric Hymn to Demeter, then perhaps this sharing of traditional forms, strategies, and content is the natural course of events. Only the peculiar and parochial text-centrism of Western scholarship, epitomised in the one-dimensional Homeric model for comparative epic investigation, has kept us from making these connections and hearing their resonance. Expanding the idea of epic Against the monumental background of Textualising the Siri Epic emerges its *raison d'être* - the epic itself (nos. 265-66). Several things strike the reader immediately. First, this is an enormous production on almost any scale: 15,683 lines performed over six days by a single bard, Gopala Naika. It puts the lie to untutored speculations that the achievement of epic length must involve the technology of writing. Second, it is a woman's story, featuring a female divinity at its center and highlighting the activities and behaviour of women and female deities throughout its course. Not coincidentally, it is a song of peace, social custom and rite, and the chain of creation. For those of us accustomed to the heroic contests of war - with male heroes competing for cities, women, and most of all for glory - as the major and defining activities of epic, this steady focus on the female world is an education in itself. From the very start, the subjects and *dramatis personae* of the Siri Epic force an enlargement or pluralisation of our narrow view of epic; when we add the religious reality of the epic as a rite, we are truly in a different world from that of the Homeric epics, the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf*, the Old French *chansons de geste*, the medieval Spanish *Poema de Mio Cid*, or even the *South Slavic Moslem* epics. The idea of oral epic begins to assume a realistic and engaging complexity. Third, this is a remarkable artistic achievement, and by that I mean a paragon of traditional art. Even for a non-Tulu speaker lacking a great deal of the cultural apparatus, the poetics of implication - the poem's traditional referentiality - makes reading this epic a richly rewarding experience. Some attention to performance units may help to place the Siri Epic in a comparative context (See *Textualising*, C. 9, for a detailed study of the segmentation of the oral performance.) On the emic side, the singer himself separated his performance into 36 segments, each of these defined by the researchers as a *sequence of lines sung mainly without interruption* (265: xliv). On the etic

side, the editors and translators decided to represent the text in some 56 cantos, primarily on the basis of textual logic and consistency. Here as elsewhere their intention to provide a readable poem remained foremost in their thinking; although no performance feature goes unreported or unexplained, their loyalty to a text that will stand on its own two feet is the operative policy. Although there is no opportunity to discuss these matters here, I recommend that comparatists scrutinize Honko's comments on the discontinuation and resumption of singing and the *correction of errors* (265: xliv-lv). (On the former, see also Foley, *Traditional Oral Epic*, pp. 284-88.)

*Mr Gopala Naika of Mapala, in Machal village near Ujire, Belthangadi Taluk is one of the many talented singers of oral epics in Tulunadu, Karnataka. The Finnish- Indian team documented his 15,683 line performance of the Siri epic on audio and video tape way back in 1990 December. This documentation is a seminal contribution and tribute to the rich oral poetry in Tulu and the vicissitudes of oral epic traditions still to be found in many other Indian states.*

At the micro level, lines were established on the basis of the singer's breath groups, very much an emic measure that mirrors what Dell Hymes has proposed in *measuring* verses in Native American narrative. Honko states straightforwardly that the metrical structure of the lines is not completely solved, and that an adequate analysis will require the expertise of an ethnomusicologist. Until such time as the inner prosody of the epic is established, one may observe that the emic lineation and the editors' bias toward a readable segmentation of the text insure a worth while experience for the Tulu-less reader. The Finnish-Tulu team offers some extremely interesting remarks about the decisions they made in adopting an overall style of translation. From the facing-page bilingual format through the insertion of punctuation, the aim at verbal equivalence in simple English, the handling of repeating phrases, and the discussion of particular challenges created by the idiosyncrasies of Tulu and/or the lack of parallel words or constructions in English, the investigators evolved a method based on clear choices about priorities. Furthermore, as Honko notes, the translation of long epic has its own special problems, with consistency of rendering (over the 15,683 lines) high on the list of attainable but difficult goals. I would note that, however one may feel about the particular choices made and the results achieved, the English version of the Siri Epic reveals what might be called an *interactive* quality. That is, because the formulaic phrases are rendered exactly and consistently, the bilingual presentation allows the reader to track phraseology in both languages, whether he is fluent in Tulu or merely able to sound out the language. Similarly, the decision to leave the metaphors in their literal form - *the head's fire* rather than *bad headache*, for example (265: lxiii) -



allows the poem to echo memorably as the reader proceeds from canto to canto, promoting a more genuine experience of networked meaning, of traditional referentiality. Not unrelatedly, the policies about punctuation bring out the adding or paratactic style of Gopala Naika's composition. A final feature of the translation strategy that also deserves mention is the uncluttered presentation of the text: in place of a cumbersome and distracting scholarly apparatus at the bottom of the page or at the back of the translation volume, the researchers depend chiefly on the freestanding commentary in section C of *Textualising the Siri Epic* (264). A brief glossary of proper names, place-names, and a few items of material culture appears in the last pages of the third volume, but otherwise the epic itself dominates the presentation in volumes 265-66. In my opinion, the discussion of translation (265: lxi-lxix) should be required reading for all those involved in translating oral epic. Even if they choose other methods than the Finnish team selected, they would profit immensely from a careful examination and weighing of the alternatives. Creating the narrative map in order to convey an idea of the overall narrative shape of what I again emphasise is very much a woman's epic, let me outline some of the major action in the first of five parts of the Siri Epic. The division into four *subepics* and a conclusion is of course the etic imposition of the editors rather than Gopala Naika's own segmentation, but it makes sound narrative sense and increases readability for a non-native audience. We will be sketching the broad superstructure of *The Ajjeru Subepic* (lines 1-3811). This section covers the events leading up to the birth of the principal character and namesake of the epic, Siri herself. The narrative opens with a cosmic and etiological initiative - the creation of a Tulu story, as ordered by the god *Iisvara* and carried out by the god *Naagaberamma*, who starts the process by sending a serious illness to an aged widower, *Ajjeru*; *Aarya Bannaaru Birmu Paalava*. It is characteristic of this epic to maintain a variety of names, some simplex and some composite, for many of its characters. One soon becomes accustomed to this variety, however, much as one learns to navigate the approved noun-epithet

pathways for naming people and deities in western European traditions like the Homeric poems. In the highly lyrical fashion that frequently plays a role in this performance, the old man's suffering is epitomised in a tear that drops from his eye and eventually reaches the temple of the trinity gods. *Naagaberamma* then takes pity on *Ajjeru* and decides to visit him in the disguise of a *poor Brahmin man*. Even for the reader wholly unacquainted with the Siri epic tradition, this figure, who appears many times, will begin to take on certain implications, signalling some kind of unexpected change in the status quo. After all, he amounts to a disguised god entering the earthly realm. Note that the formulaic, indexical phrase *poor Brahmin man* idiomatically identifies this figure together with the generic outline of the role

he is to play. (For parallels to this kind of indexical phraseology in other oral epic traditions, see Foley, *The Singer of Tales in Performance*, chs. 4-6 and *Homer's Traditional Art*, chs. 4, 7.) After the temple at *Lookanaadu* is restored and ritual worship as stipulated by the *poor Brahmin man* is established, the infant Siri is born - parthogenetically and without direct agency, it appears, since her father *Ajjeru* simply finds her crying in the siri-shoot areca-bud that provides her name. Even as an infant, she inspires a suit by *Kaantu Puunja*, and *Ajjeru*, seeking a male caretaker for his beloved home at *Satyanapura*, accedes to the would-be bridegroom's (and bridegroom's mother's) proposal. Before the wedding can be arranged, however, they must consult the astrologer about the propitiousness of the marriage and the most auspicious day for the actual wedding ceremony. This pattern of visiting the astrologer is another frequently recurring scene in the Siri Epic, a *theme* or

*typical scene* in the terminology of the oral-formulaic theory; it follows a regular sequence of constituent actions and portrays them in formulaic language. Things proceed in an expectable order on each occasion: once the principals arrive, the astrologer asks why they have come and is answered straightforwardly. He then consults his almanac and determines the time at which the stars will be in the most promising position, whatever the actual event may be. The interlocutors, in

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Lauri Honko



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the present case *Kaantu Puunja* and his mother, then return to report the happy news to others concerned, in this instance to *Ajjeru*. Like the entry of the *poor Brahmin man*, the consultation of the astrologer is not only a predictable but, more significantly, an idiomatic sequence of actions: it *slots* the unique moment within a traditional frame of reference. Again, even the reader from outside the epic tradition grows familiar with the narrative map and configures his or her expectation accordingly. Imagine how powerful an effect is achieved, then, when in a single, unparalleled instance the map provided by this typical scene leads not to propitiousness but to foretold disaster. (See further the discussion of *Abbaya* and *Daaraya* below.) All proceeds in a promising way with Siri's wedding, however, and a pattern of events with which the reader will become familiar emerges: the procession, ceremony, onset of puberty (with attendant ritual), and pregnancy. In contrast to the usual and natural sequence, Siri's puberty is delayed; she seems barren for a time (perhaps a measure of her *special* status), but eventually she comes of age and is able to bear her first child, *Kumara*. As in her epic traditions, delay in the development of a traditional pattern causes its own kind of suspense (cf. the interruption of the Feast multiform in the *Odyssey*, as discussed in Foley, *Homer's Traditional Art*, pp. 180-81). The puberty rite is itself traditional in its structure, with the bride's passage into adulthood celebrated by a feast at her paternal home, the same place

to which she will return for the actual birth. Between these crucial signposts on a woman's anticipated life-path, the epic register places another significant event: the so-called *desire-feast*. Held at the husband's home, this gathering has the ostensible purpose of soothing the unborn child's hunger, but given the elaborate preparations (including a trip to the astrologer), we may also see it as another occasion for cementing the linkage between wife and husband and their families. Or so it customarily goes. In this unusual case, the wayward husband and father-to-be, *Kaantu Puunja*, strays into an encounter with Harlot *Siddu*. Siri later recognises her unwanted intervention by refusing to wear the sari and ornaments that *Kaantu Puunja* had brought her, on the grounds that Harlot *Siddu* had tried them on first. When Siri dismisses her husband and wears another sari to the desire-feast, the reasonably well prepared reader cannot be surprised: in consorting with Harlot *Siddu*, *Kaantu Puunja* has violated both his marital vow and the predictable pattern of the ritual. Cultural expectation and traditional referentiality are shattered by his actions. Such is the impact of wholesale reversal

on the poetics of implication in the Siri Epic. In due course Siri's child is born, given the name of *Kooti Kumara*, and discovered to have divine characteristics. *Ajjeru*, the grandfather, builds a cradle for the infant and hangs it; with the assistance of maidens from four lineages, he spreads silk and deposits the child within. This sequence of actions forms a small unit in itself, helping to *slot* each instance of the care of and initial ministrations to a newborn throughout the Siri Epic. Meanwhile, a visit to the astrologer has established more than the usual details: in addition to the most suitable name for the new arrival, *Ajjeru* has been warned that if he looks at the child's face he will die. Like all other such predictions, which invariably come true (with an idiomatic, traditional certainty), this prophecy is realised. Out of concern for the distraught infant *Kumara*, and with Siri off washing clothes with her

servant maid *Daaru*, *Ajjeru* attempts to stop his crying: when the old man happens to catch sight of the child's face, he immediately faints. Siri senses trouble from afar and hurries back to *Satyanapura*, but she can do nothing except comfort her father as he passes away. His last words consist of advice to his daughter to remain free, whatever the cost. A poetics of implication The remainder of the poem, which the editors divide into *The Siri Subepic* (lines 3812-9028), *The Sonne, Gindye Subepic* (lines 9029-12279), *The Abbaya, Daaraya Subepic* (lines 12280-15063), and *The Kumara Conclusion* (15064-15683), present a rich and diverse array of characters

and events. Part of this richness, however, stems from the recurrence of traditionally significant features and actions: births, betrothals, weddings, puberty rites, desire-feasts, and funerals unify the overall narrative in more than a linear fashion, causing each *new* moment to resonate against the audience's or reader's prior experience. The genius of the traditional narrative lies not only in its impressive expanse and the epic scope of its concerns, but also - and perhaps most fundamentally - in the networked associations that enlarge its impact beyond any single text, no matter how lengthy or elaborate. For all that Gopala Naika actually manages to say during his performance of the Siri Epic, he implies a great deal more. The same poetics of implication, the same traditional referentiality, can be glimpsed and heard at the level of individual lines or groups of lines. (Here one is especially grateful to the translators for their policies as outlined above.) In addition to such commonplaces as expelling the evil eye, normally accomplished in the same or similar language, and short catalogues that document building, digging, and the like, we come upon numerous smaller

### Epics

are great narratives about exemplars, originally performed by specialised singers as super stories which excel in length, power of expression and significance of content over other narratives and function as a source of identity representations in the traditional community or group receiving the epic.



units of recurrent utterance. One common example is the speech introduction, which can also follow the speech in question. Here are two instances of a frequently used phrase: To the reply a reply, to the response a response the Brahmin gives: (5213; speech follows) Thus to the reply a reply, to the response, a response, Siri of Satyamalooka is giving in the assembly court. (4372-73; speech precedes)

Just as with analogues in ancient Greek, Anglo-Saxon, and South Slavic epic, this brief sentence has two parts: one provides the predicate in a stable, repeatable form and the other, variable part names the particular speaker. In such a case the recurrent phrase performs a basic, rather modest function by marking the onset of speech in a memorable, idiomatic way. It is perhaps among the simplest of signs at the phraseological level, bearing no apparent implication about the nature of the speech.

One clear proof of this emphasis on function over resonance is the fact that this same phrase introduces both the most elevated speeches as well as Siri's complaint to her mother-in-law *Sankaru Puunjedi*, at the close of which Siri asks the following about her husband *Kaantu Puunja*: *Has he gone to the end of town to watch Harlot Siddu's bottom?* (4839). (On the semantic leavening involved in such introductory lines in other epic traditions, see the discussion of *traditional punctuation* in Foley, *Homer's Traditional Art*, pp. 221-23.) In the same category of small verbal signs with limited resonance we may place a phrase that signals the arrival of a person from another locale. With great regularity Gopala Naika describes *the beauty of his/her coming*, using this modest phrase as a kind of traditional index. Once again, there seems to be no special overtone associated with what we might understand as a composite *word*, a single unit; it is applied to a full spectrum of characters and events regardless of the nature and purpose of the journey. We read it best, that is, as neither merely literal nor simply structural, but rather as the modest traditional idiom it is. (For a similar kind of phrase in Homeric epic tradition, see Foley, *Homer's Traditional Art*, p. 218 on *wine-dark sea*.) More resonant than these first few examples are phrases or *words* such as *fire of the child's mouth* (3020, e.g.) and the exclamation *Alas, what a sin! Alas, what a shame!* The former indexes the ravenous hunger felt by a pregnant woman due to the metabolic strain of gestation, as well as looks forward to the desire-feast that is socially prescribed as its ritual remedy. As such, the phrase also implicates the reality of pregnancy and the woman's life-pattern of birth, betrothal, puberty rite, wedding, and childbirth in a powerfully economical way. Gopala Naika *speaks volumes* through these few

syllables, drawn from the wordboard of the traditional register. The same can be said for the latter couplet - *Alas, what a sin! Alas, what a shame!* - that recurs throughout the Siri Epic to signal cataclysmic changes of fortune. In the *Ajjeru* subepic, for example, Siri, returning from her clothes-washing to find *Kumara's* cradle empty, marks the seriousness of the situation with this phraseological sign (3700). She repeats the same indexical exclamation a few lines later when she cannot locate *Ajjeru*, her child's caretaker while she is gone, in his customary place on a sleeping cot (3714). Indeed, this formula recurs dozens of times in many different narrative situations, as when Siri's co-wife *Saamu Alvedi* bemoans her *sister's* lack of a place to give birth to her second child (7753). Whatever the particular circumstance, *Alas, what a sin! Alas, what a shame!* frames

the problem as a life-threatening or at least socially disastrous one, embedding the uniqueness of the individual moment in a timeless traditional context. We could pause over many additional phraseological signs, all with greater or lesser proverbial force in this traditional epic register and performance. Also deserving of study are the many and frequently deployed similes, comparable in their periodic profusion to the famous Homeric trade mark. In speaking of *Saamu*

and Siri, co-wives to *Kodsaara Alva*, the singer lyrically pictures them as follows (7941-45); here *Naaraayina* is a *name of Vishnu*, also used as a frequent refrain line (266: 884)....*Saamu* and Siri were, *Naraayina*, like twin stars arisen in the sky, like two young serpents born in a serpent-dwelling. *Naraayina oo Naaraayina oo*. Like *Raama*, *Lakshmana*, like the children born in the belly of one mother. Or we might explore slightly larger units, multi-line descriptions shorter than a full-blown typical scene, such as the summoning of a postman and delivery of a letter. Like the South Slavic oral epic tradition, the Siri Epic depends quite regularly on such loosely configured sequences, consisting in the Tulu case of engaging the services of the postman and sending him off, followed by the arrival at the prescribed destination only to require three calls to gain the attention of the person to whom he is to deliver the message, and finally his untying of the hem in which he keeps the letter, e.g., 10421-78. Expectable phraseology accompanies this small and familiar schema, assisting in the process of traditional indexing. The game of fate but, at least for this review essay, we must be content with a single last example of Gopala Naika's mastery of the register that supports his epic tradition, one final feature of his epic idiolect. Late in the narrative, two girls named *Abbaya* and *Daaraya*, twin

*Each episode in the larger tale of oral epic projects includes comments on the idiosyncrasies of the given performance tradition and the circumstances of its collection, and offers evaluative consideration of the conclusions drawn by the investigator.*

daughters of Siri's second child *Sonne*, petition their father *Guru Marla* to be trained in the book-learning that oral epic so often celebrates but never itself employs. (See the discussion of the famous tablet of *Bellerophon*, mentioned by Homer, *Iliad*, 6.166- 80, in Foley, *Homer's Traditional Art*, pp. 1-5.) Here are three short passages describing their request, its fulfillment, and their rejoicing over the success of the process. First comes their plea (12404-07): *Naraayini Naaraayina, father, we must now learn reading, writing, knowledge, wisdom, we must learn! Such a desire we have, father, father! Guru Marla* then provides the necessary materials and sets the tutorial in motion (12411-13; 12416-17; 12421-22; 12429): *Guru Marla had slates, books brought, see. He had bags, bags prepared. The children's bags he filled with books, slates... Taking the children for reading, writing to the gallery, to the writing hall,...* *In the gallery, in the writing hall The children now learn knowledge, wisdom... with reading, writing the children filled their bellies. Their education completed in an instant of narrative time, Abbaya and Daaraya happily celebrate their achievement* (12444-49, italics added): *we are, father, in four kingdoms, in four regions, in reading, writing, in knowledge, wisdom, in playing cenne, today, we are very skilful, skilful. Thus they say in four kingdoms, in four regions, father!* A traditional audience - and the reader attuned to the inimitable

contribution of the epic register and idiolect - will hear the formulaic echoes among these passages, a resonance that indexes each of them in a larger frame of reference. As in other oral epic traditions, for the native audience this resonance presumably stems primarily from a deep fluency in the traditional language and an understanding of Gopala Naika's personal use of it, and not simply from parallel instances within the linear expanse of a single performance-text. The twin girls ask for *reading, writing, knowledge, wisdom*, in short, and that is precisely what they receive and rejoice over once they have acquired it. But the art of Gopala Naika does not end with function and structure. In the third passage an added detail (italicised here) is appended to the formulaic description of their learning: a surpassing skill at playing *cenne*, a type of board game with pebble counters. At first sight this seems an innocent enough discrepancy, especially within a multiform medium whose lifeblood is variation within limits. But consider the fact that soon *Abbaya* and *Daaraya* will beg their doting father for a silver *cenne*-board with golden pebbles, and that his ready compliance - which entails special forging of precious metals by the smith *Ciinkrooji*

- will eventually lead to the twins' death via the intercession of a *poor Brahmin man* begging alms. In a fit of pique, and encouraged by the Brahmin, *Abbaya* uses the board to strike her sister on the head, fatally as it turns out; later she commits suicide by throwing herself into the same well where she disposed of *Daaraya's* corpse. These events are, however, not as final or disastrous as they first seem, (though the initial discovery that they are missing is indexed with the *Alas, what a sin! Alas, what a shame!* sign, 14092; 14106), since they allow the girls, who were never meant for this earth, to enter *maaya*, the other world (14047-52). In the end it is the telltale detail of expertise in *cenne*-playing, woven into the the otherwise entirely expectable tapestry of phrases documenting the girls'

learning, that signals their transformation-to-come. Gopala Naika has used the traditional medium to highlight that crucial detail, to put it into relief, to underline the modest-seeming discrepancy that forecasts the plot some 1,500 lines ahead. An oral epic in traditional and scholarly context. In summary, any scholar interested in the worldwide phenomenon of oral epic, from the manuscript-based narratives of the ancient and medieval worlds to the still extant traditions around the globe today, must be extraordinarily grateful to Lauri

*When Siri dismisses her husband and wears another sari to the desire-feast, the reasonably well prepared reader cannot be surprised: in consorting with Harlot Siddu, Kaantu Puuñja has violated both his marital vow and the predictable pattern of the ritual. Cultural expectation and traditional referentiality are shattered by his actions. Such is the impact of wholesale reversal on the poetics of implication in the Siri Epic.*

Honko and the Tulu-Finnish team for their efforts. Thanks to their imagination and sustained work, the *Siri Epic* comes to us embedded in both its own traditional context and a unique scholarly context. For those familiar with the *Siri* stories and ritual from an insider's point of view, this project offers an opportunity to study and share a remarkable heritage. For those who must adopt the outsider's perspective (surely the far greater percentage of those who read these three volumes), there exists an unprecedented opportunity to enlarge one's comparative vision. With this publication of the *Siri Epic*, specialists in oral-derived traditional narrative can juxtapose their theories of composition and reception, of phraseological and narrative multiformity, of the roles of individual and tradition to real, viable, meticulously documented analogues. Regardless of what our specialties may be, we owe a great deal to the research team, and not least to Gopala Naika himself, whose 1990 performance of the *Siri Epic* his fellow bard Homer might well have characterised heroically as *far the best of all things*.

## References

1. The term performance arena designates a virtual (rather than a geographical) space defined by the speech-act. Every time an oral traditional performance takes place, in other words, it occurs in what may be understood as *the same place*, in that the same or a similar context is summoned, the same or a similar form of the language is employed for communication, and therefore the same or a similar set of implications is active. See Foley, *The Singer of Tales in Performance* (Bloomington: IUP, 1995), pp. 47-49, 79-82.

2. I here focus on the Moslem epic because of its relative length, elaboration, and general *fit* in genre with the kind of narrative that Honko is studying. The Christian songs from this same area (sometimes from the same singer), while in certain cases treating the same or cognate stories, are typically much shorter (100-400 lines on average) and display different characteristics. See Foley, *Immanent Art: From Structure to Meaning in Traditional Oral Epic* (Bloomington: IUP, 1991), chaps. 3-4.

## EXTEND A HELPING HAND

We the members of Melattur Bhagavata Mela Natya Vidya Sangam, sorry to bring to your kind notice that as we were about to commence the 36<sup>th</sup> year *Bhagavata Mela – Sri Lakshmi Narashimha Jayanthi* – the Divine Varshika Dance-Drama Mahotsav, there was a huge fire accident which gutted down the entire stage and costly equipment's kept ready for the function. The loss is heavy and estimated at Rs. 3 lacs.

As you may be aware Melattur is the centre for the *Bhagavata Mela*, which is a rare and unique style of dance and welcomed by all connoisseurs world over. Immediately after the calamity we went to the deity (at the Varadaraja perumal Temple) and prayed for his orders. We got his orders immediately that the function should be conducted at the very next auspicious occasion. We therefore, appeal to you to contribute liberally in view of the heavy loss, so that the function is conducted atleast at a modest scale. As the function is to be conducted at short notice, your contribution may be given by cash and those who are residing outside may send demand draft in favour of *Melattur Bhagavata Mela Natya Vidya Sangam*, payable at Thanjavur address to The President, Melattur Bhagavata Mela Natya Vidya Sangam, 17, North Street, Melattur- 614 301, Thanjavur Dist.

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This is an appeal for donations towards keeping the Yakshagana Gombeyatta tradition alive. Please contribute in any way possible. Anyone who has seen a production of this group will realise the quality of these puppets, their manipulation and performance. Being a puppeteer anywhere in the world is not easy-and especially so for a young person who has the mammoth task of keeping his ancestors' tradition-a living tradition-alive even in the very area it comes from.

Please Help Bhaskar Kogga Kamath.

DADI PUDUMJEE

The Ganesh Yakshagana Gombeyata mandali of Upinakudru (Karnataka, in south India) is the best-known puppet theatre group in Karnataka. It has introduced the Yakshagana puppet theatre tradition to several foreign countries. The tradition was maintained and supported by the late Devanna Kamath (1888-1971) and continued by his son Kogga Kamath 1971 onwards. With Kogga Kamath's son Bhaskar Kamath the tradition has entered the third generation stage. The tradition had an earlier history when Denanna Kamath's ancestors used to practise it, but it was the late Devanna Kamath who revived it after a lapse of several years when the puppets had almost been forgotten. The puppet show resembles the traditional Yakshagana (Badagu tittu) style of the northern tradition, Karnataka, India.

String puppets of Kogga Kamath: Shri Ganesha Yakshagana Gombeyata is based on an ancient folk art. Three brothers, by name Laxman, Narasimha, and Manjappa Kamath, some three centuries ago founded it in a small village Uppinkuduru, Kundapur Taluk, Udupi district. Even today this house is

remembered as the house of Bhagavatas. But the marionette form is known as Kogga Kamath received the prestigious Tulasi Samman of the Madhya Pradesh government in 1995. Kogga Kamath's son, Bhaskar Kamath is a young creative artist now working as the spirit behind the art form. He authored a book on the complete history of the Uppina Kuduru Kamath's string puppet art. The troupe is able to give new and traditional performances by means of marionettes or string puppets in the Badagu thittu yakshagana style and also staged a performance in Konkani as well as in Kannada. The troupe has worldwide recognition and has travelled extensively in India and abroad.

Kogga Kamath's son Bhaskar Kamath works in a financial institution nearby for self-sustenance and attends to shows, training programmes after working hours (Kogga Kamath we hear is almost paralysed and cannot move). However, he has already purchased 20-cent land to build a little there for his puppets. He is looking for institutes/individuals who are willing to give financial support to promote this art form so that he can give up his job (which at present helps in supporting his family) and dedicate himself wholly to the art and training of puppetry. Estimate for constructing one storied building that would house a museum and library would be Rs.32,00,000 only. Please send you contributions to Bhaskar Kogga Kamath's postal address: Sri Ganesha Yakshagana Gombeyata mandali, Post Uppina Kuduru 576 230, Kundapur Taluk, Udupi District, Karnataka, India.