

## **Epics in the Oral Genre System of Tulunadu**

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Tulu is the language spoken in Dakshina Kannada district, the coastal region of Karnataka state of South India, which is also traditionally known as Tulunadu (the Tuluva region). Since the language functions as a powerful medium of folk expression in this region, oral literature in Tulu is abundant and varied. Tulu oral tradition comprises many genres, which we can study at the small group level (micro-genre), at the regional level (macro-genre), or at the global level (mega-genre) (see Honko 1980).<sup>1</sup> My paper concentrates on epics in the oral genre system in Tulunadu. I will start by briefly introducing the oral genres in Tulu folk culture.

Tulu culture, still a living tradition, is structured mainly on the ideology of the agriculture of the region. Tulu oral literature is thus mainly focused on paddy cultivation, the major form of agriculture, and other types of cultivation like arecanut, coconut, plantain, and green vegetables. In fact, traditional Tuluva culture as a whole is centered around the production of paddy, coconut, and areca, and the methods and tools of such production. In this respect, the oral literature based on this kind of work culture is the predominant manifestation of Tulu culture. The *bhutas* (deities) of Tulunadu and the oral epics that are the vehicles for the genesis and dissemination of such *bhutas* are created for the purpose of protecting the lands, crops, and also the people.

Tulu oral literature comprises genres like folktales, myths, legends, proverbs, and riddles, in addition to folk poetry, which is very rich compared to other genres. Collections of proverbs and riddles in Tulu have been made and studied; to date, about 10,000 proverbs and 1000 riddles have been collected and published. The contents of these smaller genres and riddles have to do mainly with agriculture, kinship, and the family system, the caste system based on different professions, and the flora and

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<sup>1</sup> Scholars have discussed in detail the folkloristic theories of genre (cf. Honko 1989, Ben-Amos 1992).

fauna of the Tuluva region. Folktales in Tulu have also been collected to a certain extent and classified according to the international type and motif indices. The practice of telling folktales is diminishing and at present genres like folktales, proverbs, and riddles are not as vital a part of the living tradition as they were fifty years ago.

Compared to these forms, the genres that make up Tulu oral poetry are very much part of the living tradition even now. These include *paddanas* and *sandis* (oral epics), along with songs sung in different contexts such as planting the paddy seedlings, grinding, ploughing, drawing water from the well, and other kinds of work, as well as songs sung in different social and religious ceremonies, songs connected with different types of dances, nursery rhymes, and so forth.

In addition to *paddanas*, there is an important genre of Tulu oral poetry that functions as worksong. These *kabitas* are sung as group songs in the paddy fields, normally by women while planting seedlings (*neji*). As a generic term, *kabita* is not pan-Tuluva by nature, though the people in some regions use it in that sense. In many places people either intone the chorus line of each *kabita* independently or sing *obele* songs. *Obele* is the most popular kind of *kabita* and is pan-Tuluva in distribution.

The singing of *kabita* is controlled by one woman who is well versed in performance and who also has a rich repertoire. She sings each line of the song, while the rest join in the chorus. This process continues with different texts, depending upon the amount of work to be done in the paddy fields. *Kabitas* vary thematically, but most of them are not complete narratives; in comparison to *paddanas*, they are shorter and looser in structure, a function of the context in which they are sung. The message conveyed can be understood by considering that context: working in the field is a relaxed, non-ritualistic pursuit.

The popular *kabita*, or *obele*, deals with the working situation.<sup>2</sup> A landlord seeks the help of a traditional laborer to obtain women to work in the paddy fields. He goes to fetch the women laborers and on his way back mortgages two women in order to buy liquor and betel leaves. The landlord becomes angry, and the narrative suddenly tells us that his wife becomes pregnant. The *kabita* concludes positively with the landlord's fathering two children, a boy and a girl. With appreciation of the children's generosity, the song comes to an end.

An interesting *kabita*, "Ye da balla maga duji kemmaira" ("Hello, come on, oh son, oh magnificent bull"), describes different parts of the animal's body, its gestures, and its various actions. At the end there is a

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<sup>2</sup> The root of this term, *bele*, means "work."

reference to the bull's waiting for the cows in camouflage, and also to their appearance. Though there is no indication in the text, in the actual singing context the women at this juncture merrily catch hold of each other. On inquiry I was told that they are simulating the action of a tiger catching the cattle. But throughout the text there is no reference whatsoever to a tiger, and this action follows immediately after the mention of the bull amorously lying in wait for the cows. What is more, the whole situation is enacted in a relaxed, contented manner rather than in an atmosphere of fear. Considering the text and its context, the *kabita* can best be interpreted as a symbolic representation of the desire for mating and motherhood on the part of women.

In the paddy fields, village women transcend the boundaries of caste, family, and social and mental restrictions. The *kabitas* sung in the fields by women mainly reflect female aspirations, dress, and ornaments, particularly their wish to go to temple festivals and their sexual urges. Some others reflect their relationship with birds and plants. One can thus quite comfortably arrive at the conclusion that women were the actual creators of this genre. Such *kabitas* have messages to be passed on from generation to generation of working women. The female consciousness inherent in the genre and the participation of women in performance are very important in understanding the overall cultural setup.

### ***Paddana* (Epic)**

In Tulu oral tradition, epics, generally called *paddanas* in local generic terminology,<sup>3</sup> are the most popular and most widely distributed genre. Scholars have discussed the etymology, content, structure, context, and meaning of these *paddanas*, which form a major part of Tulu oral poetry and are found in different forms with different themes and presented for different communicative purposes. In other words, they vary both in content and context.

In a series of papers, Peter J. Claus has discussed the structure of *paddanas* as a genre. He identifies them as a mixture of myth and legend, maintaining that “much of this body of tradition consists of legends of the local spirits and deities, bhutas, and daivas” (1978). Heidrun Brückner (1987) identifies *paddanas* as myths: “He (the performer) performs ecstatic

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<sup>3</sup> The people use the terms *paddana* and *sandi* many times as synonyms, and there seems to be no specific distinction between them. The generic terms used by the people vary from place to place, context to context, and also person to person.

dances which sometimes reflect or enact events referred to in the myth. These myths are called *paddanas* in Tulu.” She further observes that “the *paddanas* make up a mythological, linguistic and poetic corpus which strengthens the cultural identity of major sections of the non-brahmin Tulu speaking population.” In his paper on “Folk Poem as Epic” (1986), D. Rao studies the folk epic model with reference to the Tulu *paddana*. According to him,

Most of the Tulu *paddanas* have a geo-historical, legendary, or mythical base. In turn, they animate the landscape, history, legend or myth that sustains the folk tradition. . . . The *paddanas* call for a modified aesthetic, a different creative critical model which might facilitate a more precise understanding of the creative factors at work in the Tulu folk imagination.

A large number of *paddanas* deal with the origin and dissemination of *bhutas*. Such *paddanas* are normally recited in the context of *bhuta* performances like *kola* and *nema*. The performers of a particular *bhuta* recite the lines mostly while putting on make-up. Usually a woman from the performer’s family joins in reciting the alternate lines, and her recitation is accompanied by rhythmic beating of a drum (*tembare*). Considering this context of recitation, the preliminary one for the *bhuta* performance, one must not simply conclude that *paddanas* can be defined as a genre in terms of that context only. The question that should be posed here is whether this is the only natural context of *paddana* recitation, and the answer may be a complex one. In the *bhuta* performance, only portions of the *paddana* text are recited, and often the recitation or performance cannot be explained in relation to the text. There are some occasions when no *paddana* recitation takes place, yet the participants do not consider the performance incomplete. A small portion of the text, even when it does have a context, is not useful for identifying the epic as a genre.

*Paddanas* (or *sandis*) are also sung in the paddy fields while plucking seedlings. The work songs sung in the context of planting the seedlings are called *kabitas*, which I have discussed above. The very fact that the *sandis* or *paddanas* are performed as work songs, normally by women, indicates that there is no prohibition against singing them outside the *bhuta* performance context. The female performers may be two or three in number, and the singing goes along with their labor. Even in such cases the whole text of the *paddana* is many times not recited, and the duration of the recitation as a whole will depend on the magnitude of work to be done in the paddy field.

One major subgenre of oral epic is the ballad-cycle type. The compilation and proper edition of different variants of *paddanas* dealing with a particular deity or *bhuta* reveals the existence of such a cycle. These include combinations of tales depicting the origin and dissemination of *bhutas*, such as Panjurli, Jumadi, and Guliga. These are not variants of a single *paddana*, but are different episodes in the life of a particular *bhuta*. Whether such composite edited versions can be termed true epics is a point for discussion.

This process of compilation leading to ballad-cycle and folk epic can be illustrated by taking the Panjurli *paddana* as a model. More than fifteen *paddanas* have already been collected, all of them dealing with the Panjurli *bhuta*. Some of them concern genesis, and the remaining ones relate to diffusion in different parts of the Tuluva region. Those relating to origins vary in content and also in length. More than five variants agree as far as the core of the *paddana* is concerned; the Panjurli *bhuta* is the transformation of a wild boar's offspring that were cursed for their evil deeds, mainly for destroying crops, and subsequently transformed into the *bhuta*. Interestingly, in one version, the narrative about the genesis of Panjurli is made to include even the Vedic gods, as Vishnu's sweat is transformed into Panjurli. Likewise, Shiva has been depicted as a character possessing the qualities of both the deity and a village farmer.

More than ten *paddanas* exist that give an account of the adventures of Panjurli *bhuta* and thereby its dissemination in the Tuluva region. All of the episodes substantiate the supremacy of Panjurli *bhuta* and the reasons for its worship in different places. With its magical power Panjurli causes buffaloes tethered to a jackfruit tree to vanish, momentarily blinds the priest who carried the god in procession at Dharmasthala, makes the elephant of the Kapaadi temple fall sick, does the same to the cattle at Kalle beedu, kills the two wives of Hebri Ballala, and so on.

Thus it is that Panjurli *bhuta* exhibits its supreme power through an array of magical deeds. The people who are affected approach the soothsayer, who with the help of magical objects discovers the reason for the disaster, namely, Panjurli's miracle. The remedy for the calamity is also provided by the soothsayer: he suggests that a shrine should be built for Panjurli and a festival performed. The people act accordingly and are saved from the disaster. These same incidents, with some variation in the manifestation of the calamity, are repeated in neighboring places. Thus Panjurli is worshipped in different places for different reasons, all concerned with untoward events involving the people, their crops, and their cattle. This is the formulaic framework for the geographical diffusion of Panjurli. The same framework can be applied to many other *bhutas* as

well. In every locale a *bhuta* like Panjurli is worshipped and a shrine is built in order to release social and religious tensions created at a critical juncture.<sup>4</sup>

Like any genre of folklore, *paddanas* also have to do with forming and attempting to resolve oppositions. The oppositions here include life/death, good/evil, truth/falsehood, love/hate, innocence/guilt, male/female, man/god, and so forth. The concept of *bhuta* itself is the result of the blending of oppositions, since synchronization of god and man, or of god and animal, is achieved in the individual characters of *bhutas*. Such characters embody the opposition of hero/villain as individuals, and this contrast constitutes a major pattern of epic composition.

### Long Epic

Another type of oral narrative in Tulu is the long epic, the two major members of the genre being the *Siri* epic and *Koti-Chennaya*. These epics are unique in their length, content, performance tradition, and relationship to cultural identity. The *Siri* epic, which Lauri and Anneli Honko, Chinnappa Gowda, and I have documented, runs to about 25 hours, while the *Koti-Chennaya*, also the object of study by our research group, is about 14 hours long. The *Siri* epic, which Gopala Naika sang for our project, had never before been performed by him in its entirety. In fact, this is the case with most of the oral epics in Tulunadu, since there were no opportunities or inducements for the singers to perform the epics as wholes or conglomerates. Portions of the *Siri* epic are sung at the *Siri* festival and also in the associated ritual, the *paliyo daliyo*. In this respect it can be inferred that the complete *Siri* epic was the “mental text” of Gopala Naika, the master version that informed all smaller performances, and it was only for documentation purposes that he sang the epic from beginning to end.

The normal contexts for singing the *Siri* epic are the *Siri* festival and ritual. The portions performed during these events are mainly the introductory parts of the epic, including salutations to different gods, the installation of idols, and references to the performing centers of the *Siri* festival and their distribution. Actually, these ancillary sections are not found in the performed epic text of *Siri*. Gopala Naika, who organizes the whole troupe of women for possession, sings these portions at the *Siri*

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<sup>4</sup> The seasonal changes that occur at a particular transition period, for example Sankranthi or Sankramana, are of great significance because of their close relationship with *bhuta* worship in Tuluva culture.

festival to prepare the women for their assumption of group identity. In a sense this is the beginning of the ritualization of the epic at the festival. The birth of *Siri*, some important events in the epic, and the episode of playing *chenne*, a board game, are also narrated in a dramatic style at the *Siri* festival.<sup>5</sup>

The content of the *Siri* epic is mythic in character, and this quality makes the epic more relevant to *Siri* performance, which is also mythic in nature. Though there is no complete dramatization of the *Siri* epic text in the performance context, the characters of the epic are actualized in the form of men (*Kumaras*) and women (*Siris*). In this respect, the *Siri* epic takes the shape of a mythical drama in a general sense. But such dramatization is restricted only to the dialogues between the main characters of the epic texts, that is, between *Siri* and her children. There is a unique moment in the *Siri* festival at which the epic characters, the twin sisters *Abbaya* and *Daraya*, play the *chenne*. Here again the epic text takes the form of a sequence of dialogues dramatizing the performance context of the game.

This narrative of *Siri* and the members of her next two generations has been accepted by local women as a symbol of their social identity, and with their approval and enthusiasm the narrative has taken the shape of an epic. The increased frequency and currency of singing the *Siri* epic stems mainly from the increasing popularity of *Siri* festivals, which is in turn dependent on the social structure of the family in Tulunadu. In this respect, the survival and revival of oral epics is driven by the necessity of a group of people to communicate in response to pressure that derives from different familial and social factors. Though the *Siri* festivals are not occasions for performance of the complete text of the *Siri* epic, they have supported its continuation and accelerated its distribution in Tulunadu. Both women and men who participate in these festivals are induced to learn and use the *Siri* epic.

*Koti-Chennaya* is another epic very popular in Tulunadu. It concerns the twin heroes *Koti* and *Chennaya*, their heroic deeds, and finally their deification as *daivas* (local gods). Selected portions of *Koti-Chennaya* are sung in different contexts:

1. while performing *Agelu seve* in the shrines (*garadi*) of *Koti-Chennaya*,

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<sup>5</sup> The *Siri* epic is sung outside the ritualistic context as well, chiefly while plucking the paddy seedlings. This context is the one that cuts across the form and content of all types of Tulu epic.

2. during ritual performance, specifically the annual festival in front of the shrines (*Baidarle nema*),
3. while tapping toddy from palm trees,
4. while plucking paddy seedlings in the paddy fields,
5. in the marriage ceremony during the traditional decoration with colors (*madarangi*),
6. in a satirical theatrical performance called the Purusha dance,
7. during a marriage or funeral ceremony,
8. while peeling dry areca nuts, and
9. during leisure time for the purpose of relaxation.

These various contexts for singing the epic indicate how portions of the epic are used for different purposes.

Portions of the *Koti-Chennaya* epic, sung in different situations, sometimes demonstrate definite relations between an epic text and a performance context. Consider, for example, the women singing particular portions of the epic while plucking the seedlings in the paddy fields; an example is the episode of the meeting of Koti and Chennaya with their elder sister Kinnidaru, with the enthusiasm of Kinnidaru and the jubilant way she receives the younger brothers. Since these working women are known for their hospitality in real life, they find expression for their inner feelings by singing this episode in the paddy fields. Or consider the ritual of decorating the palms and feet with colors, a practice connected with the marriage ceremony (*madarangi*). This ritual is performed for both the bride and the bridegroom on the day before their marriage. The portions sung on this occasion describe the bringing up of the children, Koti and Chennaya, by the Ballala and their auspicious shaving ceremony.

The major portions of the epic are performed during the Baidarle kola, the ritual performance with Koti and Chennaya as mythical heroes. The twin heroes belong to the Baidya or Biruva community whose traditional profession is toddy tapping. These heroes protest against the Ballalas, the feudal kings, and at the end of the epic they succumb to death in a heroic war, after which they are deified as *daivas*. Since Koti and Chennaya happen to belong to the Biruva toddy-tapping community, the people of that community have identified themselves with Baidarle nema, the festival of Koti and Chennaya, and they consider the *Koti-Chennaya* epic and its performance as an expression of their cultural identity. In modern times, more and more shrines are being built by these communities. The *Koti-Chennaya* epic has been used in different media like drama, *yakshagana* folk theatre, and cinema. These media are employed to



popularize the epic, and the Biruva community is organizing itself as a strong cultural unit with this epic at the center.

The *Koti-Chennaya* narrative is also sung during Purusha vasha, a folk theatre that is not as religious as that of *kola* or *nema*, the *bhuta* performances. It has been collected by Mr. Vamana Nandavara, a researcher working with me, from two informants (Monta and Erappa Gowda), who perform the roles of Koti and Chennaya in a version that runs to about 24 hours. These two Gowda men participate as Koti and Chennaya in the Purusha dance, a performance that ridicules the traditional folk religion, including *bhuta* performances. Though they do not recite the entire *Koti-Chennaya paddana* in this satirical theatrical performance, the portion that they do perform jointly (with alternative lines in succession) is a product of such theatrical performance. Here the message of the *paddana* is relaxation and not ritual effectiveness.

In short, the oral epics of Tulunadu have different origins, contents, forms, styles, structures, contexts, functions, frequencies, and distributions. The large number of epics, used in different living contexts, presents a challenge for scholars because the multiplicity of themes and performance situations engenders a variety of definitions and explanations. Each oral epic in the Tuluva tradition poses problems, rather than convenient generalizations, in fixing the given epic within the traditional genre system. The *paddanas* are shorter in length if the individual performance-texts are considered separately, as compared to the *Siri* and *Koti-Chennaya* epics, and it remains an open question whether these *paddanas* can be included under the epic rubric. As regards the establishment of a link between the various *paddanas* focusing on a particular *bhuta*, does the concept of ballad-cycle hold or not? Is the mythic milieu the basic structure of oral epics? At least for Tulu oral epics, it is a necessary dimension. The epics of Tulunadu lead us to a world of revelation, not only in their form and content but also in their generic complexity.

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