

Caucasian Epics: Textualist Principles in Publishing

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Russia is one of the rare countries in the world where living oral folk poetry traditions still exist in many different stages of development. Even today, folk singers all over Russia, from the Far North to the Far East, the Volga regions and the Northern Caucasus, are still performing oral folk poetry embodying the ancient traditions in highly artistic forms. Being part of the folklore of the Russian peoples, the heroic epic has assumed a great variety of generic structures ranging from archaic mythological monuments to their historicized counterparts based on genuine historical events, and from discrete, isolated fragments to grandiose epics of more than a hundred thousand lines. The most remarkable fact is that, though “written” in different languages, folk poetry coexists with universal literacy, and with highly developed book publishing and mass media, while still preserving its living oral traditions.

The heroic epic of the peoples of Russia has been recorded, published, and studied for close to 150 years. Russian scholarship and Soviet multinational folkloristics have accumulated a considerable volume of knowledge in the fields of collecting, publishing, and research—a subject that deserves special attention. The heroic epic is of particular interest to folklorists and researchers. It is practically impossible within the confines of the present article even to enumerate all the editions of the epic monuments of the peoples of Russia published in the original languages and/or Russian translation. These editions are being issued either in the region where an epic originated and was performed, or at one of the centers of Russian research, such as Moscow or St. Petersburg.

The following represents a brief account of my experience of working on the volumes of epic monuments published up through 1992 in the bilingual academic series entitled *Epics of the Peoples of the USSR* and thereafter *Epics of the Peoples of Eurasia*. The series has been issued by researchers from the Institute of World Literature and colleagues from the different parts of the former Soviet Union for nearly 23 years. The first

volume, on the Turkish romance epic, appeared in 1971 and was followed by volumes on Ukrainian and Uzbek (1972), Altaic (1973), Kazakh and Latvian (1975), Bashkir (1977), Turkmenian (1983), Kirghiz (1983-90), Yakut (1985), Tadjik and Komi (1987), Khakass (1988) and Kalmyk (1990) epics.

A considerable amount of space is devoted in the series to the Nart epic of the Caucasian peoples. Adygeian (1974) and Ossetic (1990) volumes have already been released and work on the Balkar-Karachaev epic has been initiated. A *Kalevala* volume was scheduled for completion by the end of 1993. I have been personally responsible for the preparation of two volumes in this series for publication, on the Adygeian and Balkar-Karachaev Nart epics. The following is a brief account of the principles employed in selecting texts for publication, translating them into Russian, and writing scientific commentaries. However, I first wish to give a short description of this remarkable monument itself.

The Nart epic, or epic about the Narts, is a collection of works from a number of Caucasian peoples, among them the Adygs, Ossetians, Chechens, Balkars, Ingushes, and some of the peoples of Daghestan and Georgia. These peoples differ in origin, history, cultural background, and language. Allowing for these distinctions (though their centuries-old common history and close cultural ties should not be discounted), the Caucasian epic monument belongs by right to each of the Caucasian peoples.

Different peoples' versions of the Nart epic share the same main heroes and plots. The specific character of its national versions is manifest in the roles played by individual heroes, in the functions performed by them, in their means of portrayal, and in their distinguishing poetic features.

In the Nart epic, mythological and realistic events are intertwined in unique ways. Bound in origin to other worlds and fantastic creatures, the main heroes are at the same time "flesh and blood" men, each with a character and a unique charm of his own. Over the centuries the epic has absorbed ideas from different epochs, but the clearly archaic nature of its plots and main characters has been preserved right up to the present day, as have related ancient beliefs and religious rites. Despite the fantastic character of the epic world and heroes, the life of the "Nart tribe" is a human one suffused with high moral standards and laws devised over the centuries by the Caucasian mountain-dwellers and including details of everyday life and ethnographic reality.

None of the Caucasian peoples can claim a textually complete version of the epic (following the pattern of, for example, the massive Kirghiz

Manas). Like the *Kalevala*, for instance, the Nart epic is a composite work consisting of a large number of autonomous stories clustered around the most popular heroes. In other words, it is a history of the epic Nart society presented in separate narratives.

The various national versions of the Nart epic differ in the positions of the main characters; some (like the Adygei version) feature more archaic characters, others (like the Chechen-Ingush epic) “more modern” ones. Each story constitutes a complete work of art with an autonomous plot. There are no cause-and-effect relationships between the narratives, which are united by the common characters that “wander” from scene to scene and from story to story. Needless to say, the epic heroes are transformed according to their contexts.

Folklore establishes certain correlations among the epic heroes; this is reflected in the cyclic structure of narratives, with epic texts arranged in groups around the main heroes. Some contain a number of stories depicting different stages in a hero’s epic history, from birth to death. Together these narratives re-create an epic biography of a hero, a function of the interest shown in him by a given group of people. The cyclic biography in the Adygei epic deals with the Nart Sosrukho, the Ossetic version with Batradz, and the Balkar-Karachaev with Eruzmek. Folk singers do not always narrate a cycle in a logical order, from the birth of a hero through to his death. They may relate the events in the reverse order (telling of his birth after his death), yet the epic as a whole provides a definite and consistent life history.

Research conducted in recent years has provided evidence that one narrator may join separate episodes, motifs, and plots around one hero to create a single text briefly outlining all the events. A second may attach only few epic stories to a Nart hero (one, two, or sometimes three), and describe the hero’s principal deed, his struggle against and victory over an antagonist. Other brief accounts of a hero’s epic life (his miraculous birth, his heroic childhood, the way he acquired his weapons and arms) may be given as a prelude to a heroic deed. As in the biographical cycles, all the principal events in a hero’s life are presented, but not all of them constitute autonomous stories. The Nart epics all observe the common principle of arranging stories into groups to form the cyclic biography, but they differ in the number of stories attached to a given hero. There are more stories telling of different periods in the lives of the oldest and best loved heroes, whereas the stories about the younger heroes tend to concentrate on their principal deeds. Also contained are elements of genealogical cycles; this is more striking in the Ossetic epic than in the other versions.

The poetic structure of the Nart epic has its own unique

characteristics closely linked to its historical origin and mode of existence. This remarkable monument bears traces of the worldview and collective consciousness of ancient peoples. The Adygei Nart epic, for example, reflects the struggle of its people against hostile forces at certain periods in its history from the late Bronze and early Iron Age to feudalism. While the plots about struggles against mythological monsters were inherited from pre-state times, the stories dealing with fights for tribal consolidation are relatively late. Even when referring to the most recent periods, the Nart epic avoids the addition of historical concreteness; it is impossible to establish links even between its most recent plots and actual historical events. It is an archaic mythological medium in which epic heroes coexist side by side with characters from pagan mythology.

As noted above, the Nart epic has been recorded, published, and studied for almost 150 years. Over the decades, much experience has been gained in the recording of epic texts, their translation into Russian, and scientific commentary.

The folklorists undertaking the publication of the volumes of the Nart epic in the *Epics of the Peoples of the USSR* series should have proceeded primarily from the uniqueness of this monument in its genre, but they also took into account the experience of Soviet and foreign folklorists. By the time the first volumes of the series appeared, the experience of the textological study of folklore based on Russian sources had been summarized (*Principy* 1966). Publishing epic monuments called for some interpretation, and a book on that subject, *Folklor: Izdanije èposa* (Petrosian 1977), was later issued by the compilers of the first volumes in the series.

The experience of foreign folklorists was also assimilated in compiling the various volumes. When the volume on the Komi folk epic was being prepared for publication (1987), a detailed study was made of the principles of compiling multi-volume collections of Finno-Ugric folklore established in the field by such scholars as M. A. Castren, H. Paasonen, K. F. Karjalainen, T. Lehtisalo, A. Kannisto, S. Aikio, J. Kecskemeti, G. Kiss, E. Lagercrantz, and V. Steinitz.

It goes without saying that the achievements of foreign experts in Caucasian folklore were taken into account in producing the volumes of the Nart epic. The first name to spring to mind is that of the great French scholar and specialist in mythology and the history of religions, Georges Dumézil. He made a valuable contribution to the study of the folklore and languages of different Caucasian peoples: the Adygeians, Kabardians,

Circassians, Ubykhs, and Ingushes.¹ No less considerable was his contribution to the collection and study of the Nart epic of the Adygeian peoples. From the 1930s onwards Dumézil made regular visits to Turkey to study the Adygs, who had settled there in the nineteenth century after the Russian-Caucasian war. He made a close study of their way of life, languages, and folklore and, most important of all, he immediately published the rare material he had recorded.² We thus have valuable information on the modes of existence of the Nart epic in a foreign ethnic environment. Side by side with collecting materials, Dumézil wrote a series of studies based on the analysis of all the Nart epics, including the Ossetic, Adygeian, Chechen-Ingush, Balkar-Karachaev versions. His books *Légendes sur les Nartes suivies de cinq notes mythologiques* (1930), *Loku* (1948) and *Mythe et épopée* (1968) became classics for specialists in Caucasian folklore and exerted considerable influence on the development of Nart epic research in Russia. Finally, it is thanks to Dumézil's translation into French of the Ossetic Nart stories (*Le livre des Héros*), published in 1965 in the UNESCO series of masterpieces of world literature and folklore, that the Nart epic became world famous.

In setting to work on the volumes of the Adyg and Balkar-Karachaev epics, we proceeded from the assumption that each version as a rule combines stories of several kindred peoples. Thus the Adyg Nart epic is composed of the Adygeian, Circassian, and Kabardin texts. Within each national version there exist closely related variants in different dialects (the Ironian and Digor dialects of the Ossetic language, the Karachaev and Balkar dialects of the Karachaev-Balkar language, and many dialects of the Kabardin, Adygeian, and Circassian languages). From the many variants of an epic text the compiler must choose not only the most typical ones but also those that represent different language groups. An edition of some version of the Nart epic cannot be considered complete unless it includes texts from all the languages of the given group.

In the volume on *The Narts: The Adyg Heroic Epic*, we therefore considered it necessary to include ethnic material in proportion to the different peoples within the Adyg region. We also tried to sample the most typical national versions, taking into account the limits of their

¹ See Dumézil 1931, 1932, 1935, 1937, 1938, 1975.

² Dumézil published the recorded texts of Adyg folklore in the following periodicals: *Journal Asiatique*, 1955:1–47, 439–59; 1963:1–19; *Anthropos*, 54 (1959):99–128, 149–70; 55 (1960):431–62; 56 (1961):269–96; *Orientalia Suecana*, 1962:41–80. Numerous epic texts of the Nart epic were published in the *Documents* 1960–65.

dissemination, the stability of variants, and relationships with national tradition. Our work was complicated by the fact that due to the popularization of the epic by the mass media and book publishing, the interdependence among versions (that always existed) is presently increasing. More than once folklorists have recorded fairly recent borrowings of epic plots and episodes from one national version to another. Likewise, publication can have a reverse impact on oral tradition. Scholars have acknowledged that the Ossetic material has had a considerable influence on the Balkar-Karachay, Abkhazian, and Adyg epics.

The most important stage in our work of publishing the Nart epic volume was a close analysis of the archival recordings of the text and its published variants. Part of the process of working on this volume involved a textual investigation of all the available publications of the Adyg epic. Study of a large number of stories published before the Revolution yielded more precise information on many texts ascribed to the Adygs in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; there appear to be fewer texts than was thought. One reason for this discrepancy can be traced to publication practice: it was not uncommon for a text to be issued both in the original language and in Russian translation. This fact does not, however, diminish the importance of these texts, since they reproduce the living oral tradition of the epic as it was a century ago.³ The recordings of epic stories made today provide evidence that the epic has generally reached a stage of attenuation and deformation, though it is not uncommon to hear full, virtually perfect versions of stories. Last but not least, in selecting the variants for publication, we had at our disposal not only texts whose level of recording was rather high, but also texts which, due to the present state of the epic tradition, did not reproduce the entire plot, even though some episodes were elaborated in detail and were thus of interest to scholars as evidence of the unique character of the Nart epic in its present state. The most interesting texts were included in the volume.

The idiosyncrasy of the Nart epic among the different Caucasian peoples is manifest in the fact that not only epic plots but also myths, fairy tales, toponymic legends, and anecdotes are attached to the heroes. We therefore set ourselves the task of making a clear distinction among the genres. The Nart stories involving characters from Adyg pagan mythology were thus included in the volume only if they played an important role in

³ All the best pre-Revolution publications were included in this volume and they serve as reliable sources for folklorists studying the development of epic tradition. Epic texts that were published in Russian translation in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were placed in the supplement.

the destinies of the epic heroes. Stories about pagan gods not bound to the life of the epic society were omitted. The names of the epic heroes are, among the different Caucasian peoples, linked with the names of places and historical monuments. Toponymic stories lent added weight to the heroic plots and these texts are included in the commentaries.

One distinctive feature of the Nart epic is its close relationship with fairy tales. Many autonomous fairy tales are often attached to the name of some Nart. As a rule, however, this association does not alter either the epic nature of the hero's character or the development of the epic plot. Fairy-tale plots unassociated with Nart heroes were not included in the main body of the texts. In other cases the names of heroes are linked with folk anecdotes. Sometimes they become an organic part of an epic narrative, and these texts are included in the main body of the texts. But sometimes, if they completely deformed an epic story and caused it to lose its generic character, they were placed in the supplement. It was in our opinion vital to define precisely the generic frames of the epic monument. Otherwise the concept of the epic becomes over-enlarged, as, for example, in the seven-volume edition *Narther: Adygè èpos* (Mnekayapè, 1967-71). This edition comprises various folklore materials that, though remarkable in themselves, have nothing to do with the Nart epic.

The next task we set ourselves in compiling the volumes was choosing the variants. As mentioned above, the Nart epic is composed of rather short, autonomous stories, each of which is known in many variants. Some of the variants exist in a number of performance versions. Thus, for example, some tale-variants tell of the miraculous birth of a hero from a stone, while another describes a hero born in the natural way whose mother invents the story of his birth "to conceal her disgrace." Different versions are presented in the volume, but they are chosen from a larger number of variants—those that are the most complete and of the highest artistic value. The stories were arranged into cycles united by the name of the epic hero attached to them. The cycles were then placed in a logical order, from older to younger heroes, as they exist in folk tradition.

Work on the commentaries occupied an important place in our textual research. Russian scholarship and Soviet folkloristics have acquired a vast amount of knowledge during fieldwork and this was taken into account. The commentaries provide information not only on the epic performer or the researcher who recorded a story but also on the time and place of recording. A given text is characterized in comparison with others and its archival variants are enumerated. Thus the reader can trace the dissemination of the Adyg epic.

Some specific difficulties arose in translating the epic texts into

Russian. We tried not only to render the meaning and the content of the epic, but also to re-create in the target language the unique character of the Adyg national artistic mentality as embodied in this remarkable epic monument.

The series *The Epics of the Peoples of Eurasia* is not the only one of its kind in Russia. Alongside other genres—myths, ritual poetry, legends, fairy tales, “non-fantasy” prose—heroic epics of the peoples of Siberia are being published in the series *Folklore Monuments of the Peoples of Siberia and the Far East*, to be issued in 63 volumes. Works of folklore will be published from the Altaian, Nanaian, Nivkh, Tuvinian, Khakassian, Even, Evenk, Yakut, Dolgan, Jewish, Itelmen, Kerek, Ketian, Koryak, Mansi, Nganasanian, Negidal, Nenets, Selkup, Siberian-Tatar, Tofalar, Udege, Oulch, Khanty, Choukchian, Shor, Ents, Asian Eskimo, and Yukaghirian peoples. The publication of these volumes will reveal to the world “treasures poetical and extraordinary,” as the great Leo Tolstoy said of Chechen folklore.

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