

Epic and Identity: National, Regional, Communal, Individual

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As late as 1981 Danish, Finnish, Icelandic, Norwegian, and Swedish ethnologists and folklorists introduced a debate on the analytical value of the concept of “tradition” at their triennial Nordic conference (Honko and Laaksonen 1983:233-49). It was stated that this key term in cultural studies had remained largely unexplored for far too long. One of the reasons for the new interest in this concept was a perceptible change in the research climate: people in the traditional communities to be studied had begun to employ the term in relation to certain parts of their own cultural heritage. This emancipation of previous “informants” into “co-researchers” brought about the need to survey the meanings of “tradition” in scholarly contexts.

The ethnologists and folklorists present at the meeting agreed that the term was used in three different ways, firstly, “tradition as something that is handed down in a continuous process of transmission.” This meaning was the least interesting of the three, because it reflected only the most common everyday usage found in dictionaries. It seemed to lack analytic power; that is, it was not problematic in a fruitful way. The second meaning, “tradition as the stuff out of which cultures are made and which we have deposited in our folklore archives,” was problematic because it raised the question of how tradition and culture relate to each other. Tradition was seen as a haphazard collection of material and immaterial items. The third meaning, “tradition as something representative of a social group (based on selection by members of the group or by outside agents),” proved to be the actual core of the debate. As in the previous case, an additional term offered itself—“group identity.” The third meaning clearly referred to those elements in the traditions of a group that signify the group’s typicality, its character and possibly uniqueness.

A division of labor between “tradition,” “culture,” and “identity”

The conference was able only to state the problem. In an article published several years later, I argued that it was poor economy to use the concepts “tradition,” “culture,” and “identity” almost interchangeably (1988:9-11). In an attempt to create a division of labor between these keywords I decided to settle for just one of the three available meanings. My personal choice was and still is the second one. To me *tradition* refers primarily to materials only, to an unsystematic array of cultural elements that have been made available to a particular social group in different times and contexts. Tradition would thus look like a store, only some parts of which are in use at any given time. The other parts are simply waiting to be activated, stored in the library of the human mind, always in danger of passing into oblivion because of the lack of use, lack of function.

The important aspect of “tradition” defined as the stuff out of which cultures are made is that it need not be described as a functioning system. Rather, it is a cumulative entity. Its boundaries will change with every new person entering the group or passing away. Tradition, in other words, would denote the cultural potential or resource, not the actual culture of the group.

I should mention that, in the meantime, three years after the Nordic conference another debate on the concept of tradition took place at an American-Hungarian Conference on Culture, Tradition, and Identity organized at Indiana University, Bloomington. In his lucid paper (1985), Dan Ben-Amos surveyed the varieties of the meaning of “tradition” in American folklore studies. He found no less than seven different strands of meaning, among them the meaning that I would prioritize, namely, “tradition as mass.” It seems to be a naturally evolving meaning, needed by folklorists.

Culture has likewise been used in many different ways, also as a mass concept. To me the term does, however, imply something more than mass, namely order: the organization of elements into an integrated and functional whole, that is, a system. I resist the temptation to make culture the umbrella concept and tradition something specific within it. The analytical value of the culture concept lies in its systemic application. We are not inclined to use it by content but by function; in other words, culture is not in things but in people’s way of seeing, using, and thinking about things.

When tradition is transformed into culture, something important happens. The often haphazard supply of tradition offered to a group of people through various channels acquires a systemic character. Certain parts of tradition become cultured; they are made relevant to the community

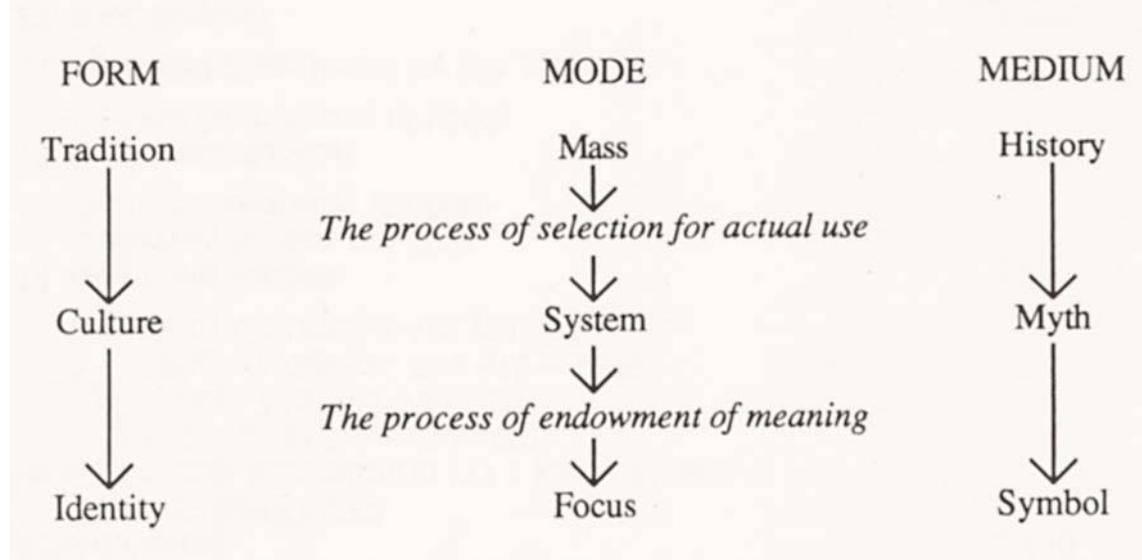
here and now. They become integrated in its way of life. The key to that ordering process is selection. Without alternatives, without potential for adoption or rejection, without the adaptation of available elements into systems of interests and values, without social control and interpretation, no tradition can pass into culture.

If culture confers order upon tradition as “mass” or as “a store of available elements,” the concept of *identity* takes one more step in the same direction. The systemic character of tradition prevails, but it becomes more specific and focused. Part of the collective tradition is singled out and made to represent the group in cultural communication. These traditions may refer to language, geographical location, music, dance, costume, architecture, history, myth, ritual, and so on. In this process of selection and added emphasis, flags, colors, and names, for example, cease to denote objects, qualities, and persons or places. They become emblems, representative symbols of the group in question.

The selection of items may look peculiar, but it is not to be judged by external form or by content only, because each thing and behavior stands for more than itself: it carries a symbolic meaning. An air of sacredness is perceptible around these symbols. They carry meanings and emotions that cause the identity group to unite and develop a sense of cohesion and togetherness.

It is now possible to define group identity as a set of values, symbols, and emotions joining people, through constant negotiation, in the realization of togetherness and belonging, constituting a space for “us” in the universe (as well as distinguishing “us” from “them”). The little word “we” is able to bring semantic unity to the set of selected symbols, be they material or abstract, ideas, things, words, or action. Much of this unity may be based on semantic compromise, even misunderstanding. Many of the symbols may have been manipulated by members of the group or even by outsiders. Yet the power of traditional elements selected and integrated into the system of identity expression is remarkable. Perhaps we should call them “supertradition” or focalized tradition to denote that they carry more meaning than their texture and content are able to reveal.

Let me summarize what I have said so far by presenting a chart intended to illuminate the translation of tradition into culture into identity. I venture to connect these concepts with other keywords, such as history, myth, and symbol.



The first two columns from the left reflect what has just been said. The third suggests the following reading: as inchoate historical facts become cultured, they are integrated into world order and attain sacredness comparable to myth, and may develop into markers of identity and carry a symbolic loading that exceeds their literal meaning.

Epics as tales of identity

What is the locus of epics in this methodological context? I submit that they may be characterized as “tales of identity,” comparable to identity symbols and able to convey extratextual meaning to those groups who recognize them as “our story.” An epic is, in the words of Bridget Connelly (1986:225), “a saga of identity and, as such, a saga of alterity”; that is, by creating “us” the epic simultaneously creates alterity, a contrast to and distance from other groups. Unity is impossible without alterity.

Epics usually rank very high among literary and traditional genres. They are great narratives or superstories that excel in length, power of expression, and weight of content compared with other narratives. Their value, however, derives less from their literal content than from their cultural context and function: they are seen in relation to something beyond their text, such as people’s perception of group identity, core values of the society in question, models of heroic conduct and human endeavor, symbolic structures of history and mythology. This means that a rather tedious and repetitive narrative may also attain greatness in the consciousness of the particular group that identifies itself with the

personages and events of the epic. Thus the reception of epics is part and parcel of their existence. Without social approval and even enthusiasm registered by at least some group, it becomes difficult to place a narrative in the category of epic (cf. Honko 1993c:618).

A host of epic scholars have pointed to the identity-structuring function of epics. As one example, let me quote Susan Wadley (1991:220-21):

Epics have a unique relationship with the community in which they are performed: they are “our story,” and stand apart from other songs and stories because of community identification with them. As presentations of regularized world views, oral epics make a statement that other folk genres cannot. Hence epics are sung: through the non-discursive statements of music and with paradigmatic metaphoric constructions, they are not making arguments, but are stating fundamental realities.

The short definition of the epic given above, “a superstory that excels in length, power of expression, and weight of content,” should thus be read from the viewpoint of the community that recognizes, owns, and maintains it. This reading presupposes at least some kind of knowledge of the social and situational context of the various performances of a particular epic. That is why empirical studies and fieldwork on living oral and semiliterary epics have become so important in recent decades. Such investigations may help us, once more, to construct models for a better understanding of those epics known only through textual evidence.

Literary, semiliterary, and oral epics

By way of definition it may be useful to divide the variegated world of epics into literary, tradition-based, and purely oral epics. By literary epics I mean great narratives created by a writer or poet; an example would be Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Their form and structure are given by the literate poet, and if there is some reference to preliterate sources and traditions, these elements do not direct the choice of plot or form. In short, they do not constitute a problem for the creator of the epic. He is master of the elements available. For the compilers of tradition-based epics—like Elias Lönnrot, the compiler of the Finnish *Kalevala*—the situation is different: they are sometimes led to include elements whose meaning they do not fully comprehend. In short, whereas oral poetry is just flexible material for the literary epic, it retains its mystery and poetic idea for the

tradition-based epic, although admittedly to varying degrees from one compiler to another (cf. Honko 1993c:620).

By pure oral epics I mean lengthy epic poems or prose narratives that live or have lived in oral tradition. Of each such poem there are normally a number of versions, and it is generally impossible to point out a master copy among the versions, a single version that dominates over the others because of its originality (*ibid.*:621-22). They survive in the minds of illiterate singers as “mental texts” and may also undergo processes of editing. This is not the place to describe all transitional forms between pure oral and semiliterary or close-to-literary epic. It may suffice to say that they are numerous and their identification also requires extratextual evidence.

Oral epics as carriers of communal and regional identities

Good contextual information and some empirical inquiry are necessary before one is able to establish the relation of an oral epic to the identities of the social groups and communities surrounding its performance. The problem is complex because one group or some of its members may be responsible for the performance while another group “owns” the epic in question or identifies itself with it. Claims of ownership and opinions offered by performers and audiences may give important clues, but sometimes the connection between a group’s identity expression and the epic remains latent. The best way to proceed is probably to look for a “community of truth,” a group that takes the epic more seriously than others and derives its social origin, rank, legitimation of certain rights and duties or morals from the contents and teachings of the narrative.

This may mean, among other things, that one and the same narrative constitutes an epic for one community but something else for another. According to Stuart Blackburn and Joyce Flueckiger (1989:6, n. 19),

The “same” narrative, even performed in similar styles, may thus be epic in one community and not in another. For example, the tradition of *Ḍholā* is performed as a long, sung narrative in both the northern plain of Uttar Pradesh and the central Indian region of Chhattisgarh. In U.P., it is an epic tradition, whereas Chhattisgarhi performers and audiences do not perceive it to be a true story or a story specifically identified with their community.

Susan Wadley represents a slightly different view on *Ḍholā*. Even when this epic is performed as entertainment, it “relates fundamental

cultural categories” (1991:221). It is possible to argue that a text that maintains a content and performative style characteristic of epics also retains some of its truth value when gliding into an entertainment function. I have witnessed the performance of *Bhuta* epics in south Karnataka at agricultural fairs called *Krishi Mela*. The dance of *Bhuta* is totally out of place and out of context when reduced to jumping in procession or on stage in front of a large audience. Yet I cannot be sure if the majority of spectators feels that this is, after all, a kind of visit by a deity to the fair. Furthermore, entertainment is not “pure” entertainment but may easily attain features of rather serious, soul-searching questioning and answering. If entertainment is temporally or spatially perceived to be in conjunction with important activities such as hunting, travel, and so forth, it may turn into a latent ritual taking its value orientation from the actual context.

At the societal level, however, I think it is sound to view epic, in the strict sense, as a functional term and thus to assume that there must be at least one group and one situation where it becomes the supreme song of truth and relates directly to the identity of the group. Having said this, I also find it necessary to reserve a place in the category of epic for narratives that fulfill the formal criteria but have not yet been proved to perform the function of epic in relation to group identity. This broader use of the term will also include texts that have lost that function but might well attain it in a suitable context, adding another dimension to comparative research on the genre.

It should be possible to posit that the moment a wandering narrative is seized and converted into a song of truth for a particular group, an adaptation of tradition must take place. The story must be fitted to both the physical environment and the mental tradition-morphology of the group. It must be able to reflect local ideals, dominant values, socioeconomic structures, and social rank prevalent among the core audience (cf. Honko 1993a:52). Even if the audience of an epic performance is of a mixed nature, consisting not only of believers but also of skeptics, mere onlookers, and passers-by, there is a core audience to which the message is directed.

From this point of view, the conclusion of Velcheru Narayana Rao’s analysis of six Telugu folk epics is illuminating (1986:162-63):

Each of the six epics examined in this essay has “heroes” who defied death. The manner of defiance, however, is what makes it possible to classify the epics into martial and sacrificial types. That each of the epics has its own audience/participants makes it necessary for us to relate the narrative to the life and culture of the patron community. It appears, from the evidence, that the socioeconomic features of the community have influenced the nature of heroism, as well as the ideological processes which the story has

undergone. The stories are considered epics, not simply because of the formal features of length, performance style, and poetic quality, but because the narratives have ordered the world view of the communities that identify with them. The participating communities, for their part, see the epic as recording true events. The transformations of such a narrative thus follow the ideological trajectory of the community that participates in its truth value.

The cohesion of the identity group behind the epic may vary. One important type of identity on which the epic discourse may be based is *regional*. This term refers to multi-class, multi-caste settings where the internal cohesion of more than one social class or caste is at stake. The epics may depict origins, relations, and even conflicts between or among a number of social groups in one region. Such a sociopoetic portrait of existing communities and their ranking, their rights and duties, may bolster loyalties toward local sources of social power and teach, in effect, rules of peaceful co-existence. Or it may turn into a dialogue between great and little traditions as described by Brenda Beck (1982:196-97):

A long succession of storytellers must interact with numerous live audiences to produce a folk epic. As these stories gradually grow from legends, they become more and more embroidered by community tradition. They may even become a root story for a great civilization. The *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyana*, India's two great epics, presently enjoy a pan-Indian status of just this kind. The process that gradually refines such epics and makes them respectable vehicles of dominant class attitudes, however, helps to separate them from everyday peasant life. When the gap between high-status outside views embodied in such works and the attitudes of marginal folk groups becomes too great, a new space opens in community tradition for legends that better express regional concerns. In the local Brothers epic, for example, artisans and farmers are the important figures, not the teachers, warriors, or ascetics of Indian classical tradition. Such a story can depict a poignant set of counter-identities precisely because it finds ways to place new but familiar themes in relation to the frame points of a known superstory The Brothers story is a mouthpiece for the powerfully mixed judgements of those who live in the margins of a wider political system. It describes their view of those who move at the center. References to India's great epics and to known Brahmanical views are found throughout this regional legend. What is more impressive, however, is that this account mocks so many pan-Indian norms. Opposition and inversion both play key roles in this epic's thematic organization. These structural features help to define the story as separate from the great literature of India in many ways. In fact, these particular details thoroughly color its oral variants.

This adaptation of epic stories into local tradition, morphology, and geography puts the great tradition on the defensive and gives vent to expressions of regional identities. It probably exerts a unifying effect on a local population divided by linguistic, religious, and caste boundaries.

Multiple identities, communal and individual: The Siri epic

Beck's observations concern South India, especially Tamil Nadu. In a similar fashion, the interplay of great and little traditions is conspicuous in the epics of Karnataka (Ramanujan 1986:55-68), both the Kannada- and the Tulu-speaking areas. They mix both in the temple sites where epics are performed in connection with full-moon-night possession rituals and in the epics themselves. The still unpublished Siri epic, probably the longest among Tulu epics, performed in paddyfields and in women's possession rituals,¹ has all the Trinity gods in its plot: Iisvara (Shiva) orders the epic to be created for Tulunad, Narayana (Vishnu) appears regularly in the most repeated refrain line of the epic, and Bermeru (Brahma) is one of the protagonists, "a poor Brahmin man," who in this and other disguises represents the divine will and judgment. Yet the epic is not about these gods, even if their action determines the flow of events. The scene is occupied by feeble men and strong women who reflect the identity of a matriarchal cast, the Bunts, the present "owners" of the epic. The heroine is a victim of male dominance and complex rules of inheritance. Yet caste identity is not the all-important issue. In fact, the 70-odd women who belong to the cult group studied by our Finnish-Indian team since 1989 represent several castes. Siri, her two daughters, and twin granddaughters provide five models of identification for harassed women with mental disorders; that is, they have been selected for cult membership by their illness and not by their caste.

Sanskrit traditions dominate the cult place where epic performances take place in front of three temples during feasts organized for the high-god of the main temple, with the local Bhuta-heroes paying their annual visit to the village population, and Siri groups devoted to the memory of an exemplary woman of divine birth. The idol of the main god is "shown to people," or carried in a pompous procession around the temple site several times and put back on the main altar. Bhuta-impersonators are of lowly caste and may never enter the temple: they dance in front of its threshold. The Siri groups stay in the less sacred areas of the site as well.

¹ Claus 1975, 1986; Honko 1993b; Rai 1986; B. Rao 1986.

It is obvious that many identities are displayed during the two-night possession rituals, partly through epics, partly by other means. There is no epic told about the high-god of the main temple, but the procession of its idol is a powerful reminder of the divine hierarchies. The event may be viewed as a corroboration of the Sanskrit traditions and the status of higher castes: the head priest of the temple site is a Brahmin who very authoritatively conducts the procession and auxiliary rituals, meets the Bhutas on the threshold of the temple, and keeps an eye on, but does not join in, the possession frenzy.

Bhutas are constitutive of the identity of the village community. This is clearly expressed in their epics, parts of which are recited gently in linear narration by an assisting drummer during the masking ceremony of the impersonator. This singing is intended more to set the impersonator in the right mood than to affect the audience—a distant parallel to a shamanistic seance. The Bhuta performance proper employs another, more dramatic mode: pantomime, dance, exclamatory song, short dialogue, frenzy possession with shouts, jumps, staring looks and shivering, imitation of battle with a sword or a burning torch in the impersonator's hand. All these and other features join into a dramatic enactment of the key element of the epic, which is not a narrative proper but a message to the village people: Bhuta, their hero-god, has traveled widely but has returned to them with the purpose of reoccupying his place in the village pantheon and guaranteeing the well-being of the villagers in the forthcoming year. In the background, one may sense the corroboration of past feudal systems: a network of fiefdoms and landowners, officially abolished as late as 1972 but still alive as a mental structure in the minds of the peasant castes and in its way also a source for religious and regional identity.

The identity provided by the Siri epic for the devotees gathering from nearby and distant villages to the temple site is of a slightly more individual and therapeutic nature. Its social dimension, sketched in the narrative, focuses not only on caste, notably a matriarchal caste, but on moral values like justice, family honor, fidelity, chastity, female independence, and freedom. In this sense, one may view the Siri epic as a relatively modern, even feminist epic that offers models of behavior sometimes unthinkable in everyday life. The female heroines are non-violent but as models of exemplary behavior they may well surpass their male counterparts in other epics (like the *Kotichennaya*), who are depicted as brave warriors. The bravery of Siri is of a social nature; she revolutionizes her male-dominated, morally inferior village environment by simply leaving her infidel husband, an unheard-of act in normal life. What is more, she maintains her charm and moral standard and continues to lead a

life of relative independence that culminates in a second marriage and the birth of a daughter, Sonne.

In the eyes of men and women alike, this is a great story of self-reliance and moral confidence. And it is just this element that is somewhat shaky in the personal identity of the troubled Siris in the cult group, many of whom have suffered a classic weakness feared most by the women of India, namely, barrenness. Lack of progeny is healed in the epic several times. In everyday life, the prime female source of marital problems seems to be a lack of self-confidence that leads to difficult human relations in the family, and eventually into mental disturbances and undesired physical states conducive to infertility and other disorders.

With this epic we reach one end of the identity register, where basically just one individual desperately seeks a locus in the universe and is put on the path of salvation by being taken into a group of Siris. In the ritual, she is able to distance her everyday identities (and the accompanying troubles) and construct a new self-reliance that is made to last until the next annual feast of the Siri group. The support from other Siris is important, since their life-histories create a sense of peers and a group identity. Yet a Siri is mostly alone with her divine status, as if hanging on a string leading from one annual Siri festival to the next. She feels protected by the divine power of the ritual and the figure in the epic with whom she has identified herself, or rather, who has chosen her to be her vehicle in the world of people. For a long time, she may not meet other Siris. Occasional visits by the only male cult person, the leader of the Siri group, called Kumara, Siri's son, may help her to solve her problems and bolster her status at home and in the village.

The national epic: Natural growth or political construct?

Having made this brief survey of oral epics in relation to regional, communal, and individual identities, let me conclude by touching upon the other end of the register, namely, epics in relation to national identity. The interplay of great and little epic traditions as sketched by Brenda Beck above renders a picture of natural growth from a local legend into a national story of roots. Oral and semiliterary regional versions of great epics have made the process more complex than this ideal type of development envisages. The localization and familiarization of epic stories according to the expectations of innumerable small audiences has played a far greater role, as recent research seems to show. Oral retellings of classical stories have proved to be radically different from their assumed

originals. Many times it seems that the reference to classic models functions merely as legitimatization of the version to be performed; after that the singer and his community are relatively free to mold the story (cf. Blackburn and Flueckiger 1989:8).

If the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa* are regarded as the national epics of India, we should bear in mind that this statement is probably truer now, in the modern media age, than in the past, and further that the sheer variety of Indian languages and ethnic, regional, and other subcultures as well as the number of available epics and communal identities greatly qualifies such a conclusion. On the whole, the concept of national epic is tricky because more often than not it results from ambitious structuring by a literary élite in accordance with some earlier model, rather than from natural growth and expansion as seen by Beck. The creation of a national epic is not a poetic but a political act.

Great epics are so different that there can be no objective criteria for the choice of model epic. Once such a choice has been made, however, it leaves its imprint on the development of epic literature. Homeric epics are just one, fairly rare case of the formation of epics, but once the *Iliad* had established itself as the paradigm of great epic, the entire European cultural and literary way of thinking about epics was organized according to its example.

This view was enhanced by the Romantic philosophers such as the brothers Schlegel, Hegel, Herder, and later Wolf and Lachmann, who drew the profile of literary development in general on the basis of ancient Greek evidence and imagined the process of epic compilation in detail. The Romantics conceived of the epic as the very beginning of literature, the first genre in the emergence of literature, to be followed by drama and lyric poetry. Such an order could not have occurred had Homer not emerged so early and had the epics ascribed to him not constituted the paradigm of good literature (cf. Honko 1993c:619).

The formation of an epic signaled not only the emergence of literature but also the emergence of a nation. As Hegel wrote in his *Ästhetik* in 1842 (quoted and translated by Reichl [1992:122]): “The entire world-view and objectivity of a nation, represented in its objectivizing form as something that has really happened, constitute therefore the content and the form of the epic in its proper sense.” This is probably one of the most lucid early definitions of epic as the “song of truth” of a particular community. History, world view, and identity converge and a conglomerate of people transforms into a community, nation, or whatever, and it is the task of the epic to report on this event.

The idea was later adopted by Marxist ideology and made the Soviet Union one of the last bastions of Romantic attitudes toward folk poetry. Because Russian *bylini* were shortish poems, Soviet scholars tended to declare the epic proper a literary genre, not a folk genre. On the other hand, they also contended that the totality of poems with the same or similar heroes constituted the epic of a nation (cf. Honko 1990b:19-21). In fact, this line of thought makes the existence of an epic (and a nation?) a matter of scholarly judgment.

The politics of national epics in Asia and Europe

Such is the hegemony of the Romantic paradigm in comparative studies not only of European but also of African and Asian epics that we must still work hard to disentangle ourselves from its domination. Recent fieldwork on oral and semiliterary epics has, however, greatly helped in producing more balanced research paradigms. Yet the concept of national epic retains its political gist, in non-European contexts as well. As Gene H. Roghair tells us, it was Akkirāju Umākāntam's accomplishment that the more than 700-year-old *Palnāṭivīracaritra* (printed 1911) became the Telugu national epic (1982:8):

Umākāntam established the *Palnāṭivīracaritra* as a heroic epic to which the Telugu people could look with pride. Just as peoples in other parts of the world had their great heroes of the past, the Telugu people could look to these heroes of their own past. He also established to his own satisfaction that *Palnāṭivīracaritra* was written by a Telugu poet of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century, Sṛīnāthuḍu. The epic was important to a Telugu-speaking people in search of a Telugu identity and local models in a past that seemed too often dominated by foreign rulers and adopted foreign models for behaviour. The question of authorship was equally significant. The establishment of *Palnāṭivīracaritra* as the work of Sṛīnāthuḍu increased the epic's value in the eyes of historians and among the literary élite, but it also diverted attention from the roots of the tradition itself.

Four things are typical in this and other stories about the origin of national epics: first, there is the individual intellect to define the needs of the people by following an international model at a particular historical moment; second, there is the poetic material of ancient origin; third, there is the literary élite to receive and interpret the epic; and fourth, the whole process amounts to a transference of tradition from one type of environment to another, totally different type. In the hands of a cultural élite, naturally

growing epic tradition undergoes a process of editing and interpretation. What emerges from this process is a supreme tale of community identity that the editors and interpreters had in mind when transferring the tradition from its hide-outs, its manuscript sources, and living oral environments, to the community of its final reception.

It is such a reception that marks the birth of a national epic. Without the approval and enthusiasm of the receiving community, the process of creating a national epic comes to an abrupt end and passes into oblivion. Only when the society hails the epic as the carrier of its cultural identity, accepts its “song of truth” about its own origins, communal history and mythology, and the ultimate set of values and aspirations, seen as coming from the past but in fact reaching to the future, only then does its status as a national epic become established. The inescapable price of this process of transference and transformation is the growing distance between the traditional environment of the epic poetry in question and the new life of the epic in a literate, educated, and mostly urban milieu. The epic has been moved from the periphery to the center: epic texts reflecting local identities have become a global symbol for the entire nation, also for areas and people who never knew the epic in its oral form.

This narrative about the birth of a national epic is but one example of what I have called the folklore process (1991:25-47). *Mutatis mutandis*, the narrative applies to a host of epics claiming communal or national status. Its distinctive features are as valid in Asia as in Europe, in the Telugu country as well as in Finland. Elias Lönnrot, the compiler of the Finnish *Kalevala* (1835), did what Umākāntam was to do later: he defined the needs of his people by following an international model of making the epic. He also did what Sṛīnāthuḍu was assumed to have accomplished: he unified the ancient poetic material into a larger whole, more refined than the previous texts. In this work he was not alone, in the sense that he was surrounded by a literary and political élite who had cherished hopes for a national epic long before it became clear that Lönnrot was the best man to carry the project to its conclusion. It was the reception by this élite that made the *Kalevala* what it still is today—a paramount symbol of the cultural identity of the Finns. Only much later, when the epic had become part and parcel of a Finnish educational system that did not even exist at the time of its appearance, did the *Kalevala* become familiar to the Finnish population at large. The distance from original oral poetry cultures was remarkable: the Karelians and Finns near the eastern border of Finland, who had preserved the poems out of which the epic was compiled, led a life quite different from that of the cultural urban élite in the capital of Finland. Eventually the oral poetry began to wither away in its natural environment, but its

second life in the literate culture of Finland continued, mainly through the national epic.

The value of a literary touch: A difference between paradigms?

There are, however, also differences between the political narratives about the nationalization process of the Telugu and Finnish oral epic poeties. One of them is the connection of the *Palnāṭivīracaritra* with a literary poet. For a European audience seeking its identity in preliterate roots, such a connection would have been unthinkable during the heyday of Romanticism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. We may have here a paradigmatic difference between Asian and European views on oral and literary poetry: what are sharply separated in Europe are accepted in Asia as truly interacting and cooperating units of cultural heritage. Regardless of the nature of Śrīnāthuḍu's alleged contribution, it is obvious that the epic, surviving through both manuscripts and oral performance, gained enormously in importance when a famous poet emerged from behind a *poeta anonymus*.

Not so in Europe. One of Elias Lönnrot's main concerns to avoid incurring the kind of criticism that had demolished Macpherson's *Poems of Ossian* a few decades earlier, namely, that the compiler had in fact composed, written much of the epic (see Thomson 1987, 1990). Lönnrot firmly denied, and rightly so, any involvement in purely literary verse-making. Only three percent of the lines of the epic are from his pen, most of them at the beginning and end where the personal voice of the epic poet is heard. Lönnrot used the lines and passages he selected from oral poems as a protective shield: as long as his material came from illiterate oral singers, he could not be accused of literary creation or forgery of oral sources. The truth lies somewhere in between: even if the lines themselves were original, their combinations were more often than not from Lönnrot's editorial pen. He justified this method by saying that he only did what the illiterate singers were prone to do when creating cycles of poems, new entities on the basis of previous textual models.

Lönnrot saw himself in two roles: one was that of an editor, comparable to the hypothesized editors of Homeric texts in the Peisistratean period, as argued by Wolf,² the other was that of a contemporary singer of ancient oral poetry (cf. Honko 1990c:181-229). Lönnrot became the medium of the last singers of Karelian, Finnish, and Ingrian epic poetry

² See, e.g., Schadewaldt 1959:9-24 and de Vries 1963:2-21.

during its heyday and incipient decline. He internalized their poetic systems, created a competence, a command of multiforms and poetic rules that was eventually unique, representative of not only one but many regions. In his hands the collected texts first became homeless, that is, separated from their original contexts and co-texts, but were later amalgamated into his personal tradition-system. The existence and development of this system may be studied through the five versions of the epic that Lönnrot produced during the Kalevala process—in the narrow sense of the phrase (Honko 1986)—lasting from 1828 to 1862. As a creative poet Elias Lönnrot was of mediocre talent, but as a medium for oral epic singers he was remarkable. Yet it was his vision, not theirs, that materialized in the *Kalevala*. His creation was not to be sung but read; he wanted a book equal to “half of Homer.”

From an Asian perspective, the debate around Macpherson, Lönnrot, and other proponents of the Romantic theory on epic may seem impenetrable. The fine line separating Macpherson, who wrote many of the actual lines in *Ossian* but modeled them according to ancient sources, and Lönnrot, who created a patchwork out of originally oral lines but yet presented a unifying epic vision of his own, may seem immaterial. If the result was good epic poetry in both cases, both men could have been hailed as national literary heroes. Yet Lönnrot is accepted and Macpherson discarded as a national hero: the *Kalevala* survives as a national symbol whereas *Poems of Ossian* belongs to the history of literature, even though both men followed the norm appended to the list of tales in the twelfth-century Book of Leinster (quoted by Thomson 1990:128): “He is no *fili* who does not harmonize and synchronize all the stories.”

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