

Turkic Oral Epic

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What is oral poetry? When Socrates asks Laches what courage is, he gets as a first answer that courage is when someone bravely fights against the enemy without taking flight. Socrates is not pleased with this answer, because he wants to get to the essence of virtue rather than discuss examples of virtuous behavior. So, what is oral poetry? Like Laches I will have to answer by giving examples rather than getting to the essence.

Oral poetry in my field—which I take to be that of Turkic oral epic (rather than medieval “oral” epic, although it is as a professor of medieval English that I earn my living)—is first and foremost when a professional singer performs narrative poetry (together with some other well-defined types of poetry) to an audience. A professional singer? Maybe one should say a professional traditional singer, that is, a singer who has acquired his repertoire in the traditional way, by “studying” with a master singer rather than at a music academy. But here already we run into all kinds of difficulties (Socrates would have his fun): sometimes singers have not had the benefit of staying with master singers and learning from them, sometimes they have had additional or simply different ways of acquiring a repertoire (by hearing books/manuscripts read to them or reading them themselves; by listening to taped performances; even—yes, *contradictio definitionis!*—by studying at a music academy). Sometimes singers cannot be professionals because there is no market for their goods anymore, and sometimes a tradition is moribund and only the amateur carries it on. But the prototypical epic singer, as it were, does exist and is still very much a reality in some traditions: the Kirghiz bard (probably the strongest tradition), the Uzbek *bakhshi* (in particular in the south of Uzbekistan), the Karakalpak *zhynrau* (about to die out), the Kazakh *aqyn* (mostly in Xinjiang, China), and others.

And how oral is “oral” in these cases? Again, the prototypical case is that of the singer learning orally an epic that exists only in oral form and is orally performed by singer-generation after singer-generation. This is, of course, an idealized picture, idealized for the twenty-first century, but also

for the twentieth century. It is true that compared to Europe the folklore of Central Asia has been only fragmentarily recorded, and recording started seriously only in the thirties of the last century (with some exceptions like Radloff in the nineteenth century). Yet literacy as well as books have been around for some time, and in some traditions (like the Uzbek tradition of Khorezm) the written word has never been spurned by singers. Nonetheless, all things considered, I would say that “oral” in the case of Turkic epic means orally composed, orally transmitted, and orally performed.

What are the most interesting new directions in oral tradition studies in my field? I think one new direction is simply the greater awareness among native scholars in Central Asia of western scholarship. This new awareness might lead to better and fuller documentation and eventually to new interpretations of their material. However, this development is still in its infancy. If I had to single out a recent publication in my field (with a catholic definition of “field” by incorporating the Indian subcontinent), I would mention the late Lauri Honko’s edition and translation of the Siri epic of southern India (Honko et al. 1998, Honko 1998). This is a publication that is based on meticulously documented material; it has an extensive and in many ways ground-breaking theoretically oriented introduction (of particular note is the idea of a “mental text”); and it is exemplary in combining western scholarship with the expertise of native scholars.

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References

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