Challenges in Comparative Oral Epic

John Miles Foley and Chao Gejin

Introduction (by Chao Gejin, November 2012)

The present paper was composed by the late John Miles Foley and myself more than ten years ago, during the time I held a postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Missouri granted by the Ford Foundation. We met frequently on campus, discussing issues covering a wide range of topics, especially oral epic traditions. During these conversations, we recognized the need to write something in response to significant challenges in epic studies that would illustrate the richness and diversity of epic traditions in particular. With these goals in mind, we started to work on this piece together two or three afternoons each week throughout the summer of 2001, sitting side by side, composing paragraph by paragraph, and incorporating examples and scholarship from our respective experiences and backgrounds. We moved forward steadily and eventually fulfilled our plan. A Chinese version of this article appeared in 2003 in a collection of papers focusing especially on Oriental Literature.[1] At the time, it provoked reflections on basic dimensions of epic poetry and, furthermore, facilitated multiple ways of understanding epic, moving beyond a purely Homeric criterion of epic poetry.

At a personal level as well as professional, I highly regard this paper because it reflects both our long-term friendship and our common interests. John made his first trip to China soon after I returned to Beijing. He delivered lectures in our institute, conducted field trips to Inner Mongolia, and visited a number of scholars working on related research. As a result of these early collaborations, his own compositions began to include additional Mongolian examples, such as the singers Choibang and Losor, among others. From then on, he visited China regularly. He was the first speaker to initiate the yearly "IEL International Seminar Series on Epic Studies and Oral Tradition Research," and he held appointments within the Institute of Ethnic Literature, most notably as chief advisor of the "Center for Oral Tradition Research."

It was a great misfortune that our newly designed program on oral tradition and the Internet with partners in Missouri, Helsinki, and Beijing was interrupted by John's unexpected absence. Still, the blueprint of this international program will be followed and fulfilled without a doubt. His cutting-edge thoughts will continue to shed light on our explorations. In Mongolian epic tradition a true Baatar ("hero") would never truly pass away. John is, by any measure, just such a Baatar, and he, too, shall be with us forever.

---

[1] Foley and Chao Gejin 2003.

An Overview of the Study

In this paper we propose to examine some fundamental issues in comparative oral epic. Our investigation will proceed across four epic traditions widely separated in space and time. Two of them, the Mongolian and South Slavic epic, are or were recently still living and therefore observable by fieldworkers. The other two, the ancient Greek and Old English epic traditions, are preserved only in manuscript form. Although no comparative treatment can ever claim to be exhaustive or universal, we feel that these four witnesses represent considerable diversity and collectively offer a chance to forge a suitably nuanced model for oral epic. We welcome responses from scholars in other fields, especially Africanists, as we all search for ways to understand the international phenomenon of oral epic.[2]

In order to provide a clear path through this complex subject, we propose a five-section structure, with each section keyed by a question that reflects an issue of contemporary importance. Thus the paper will begin by asking "What is a poem in oral epic tradition?" Scholars have argued from many different perspectives about the large-scale organization of oral epic; are the smaller tales integral parts of a single whole, facets of a single gemstone, or simply individual narratives that collectors have assembled into "anthologies" based on a literary model? On a slightly smaller scale, we will then consider the question of "What is a typical scene or theme in oral epic tradition?" The focus here will be on those recurrent passages, such as the arming of a hero or the boast before battle, that epic bards use as "large words" in their tale-telling vocabulary. How are they configured in each tradition and what kinds of flexibility do they show from instance to instance?

From macro-structure we then move to micro-structure. The third section will set the stage by asking "What is a poetic line in oral epic tradition?" This turns out to be a more difficult and open-ended inquiry than it might at first seem; once we leave the narrow sample of Greco-Roman meters, for example, the line-unit draws its definition from features other than syllabic criteria and word-breaks. Additionally, there is the matter of a performed line, a voiced verse-form, as distinguished from the kind of poetic line that we come to know spatially as a creature of the manuscript or printed page. The fourth section will deal with the question of "What is a formula in an oral epic tradition?" It will concentrate on the recurrent phrase, the smallest "word" or unit of utterance in the oral epic poet's compositional lexicon. Basing our conclusions on the poetic line that is the vehicle for the formula, and working over the four quite different poetic traditions, we aim to show how this smallest increment of poetic structure can vary both within its own tradition and from one tradition to another.

Finally, our fifth section will address what may be the most urgent question of all: "What is the *register* in oral epic poetry?" By posing the query in this way, we mean to ask about both major aspects of the specialized poetic language: its overall structure (from cycle through story-pattern to typical scene to formula) and, crucially, the meaning that each of these structures bears. In this part of the essay we will be summarizing the results of the first four questions and then inquiring into the traditional implications that each one carries. How do we understand one

---

[2] See esp. the publication of the Siri Epic from southern India (Honko et al.1998a and 1998b, with context in Honko 1998) and the comparative digest of articles on the recording and publication of oral epic (Honko 2000).

canto of the Mongolian *Janggar* epic in the context of the whole cycle? What bearing does a boast before battle have on the events to follow in Old English epic? Does Homer's phrase "but come" mean anything beyond what we can establish by reference to a dictionary? In short, what is the *traditional referentiality* of each "word"—from the smallest phrase to the whole performance—in an oral epic tradition?

Corpora for Analysis and Illustration

We begin by citing the collections of oral epic material to be used for analysis and illustration over the four traditions and the five sections that follow. For Mongolian oral epic we have drawn from the published performances of *Janggar* by the singer Arimpil, as transcribed and edited by D. Taya (1999). Arimpil was himself illiterate; he had no formal education and thus could not learn songs through his own reading. Nonetheless, he was able to perform about twenty cantos, a total of approximately 20,000 lines of orally performed epic. This collection of his works is unique in at least two ways: it was the first collection of the *Janggar* cycle from a single singer in China, the homeland of *Janggar* oral epic, and it is also the only anthology to be published without editorial interference.[3]

How this unusual edition came about is a story in itself. A young girl had read to Arimpil from a highly edited anthology of *Janggar* epic, which consisted of both his own versions and versions by other singers. He was disappointed that the songs had been changed, observing that they weren't his. As a result, he asked D. Taya, his nephew and the only one in the family who had received enough formal education to fulfill his wishes, to transcribe and publish his performances just as he sang them, without any editorial changes.

All in all, Arimpil is the most prominent illiterate *janggar chi* (epic singer) ever recorded in China. Born in 1923 to a family that belonged to the Torgud Tribe, now resident in the Hobagsair Mongolian Autonomous County of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, he enjoyed the privilege of listening to Holbar Bayar, one of the most famous *Janggar* singers, from the age of 7 or 8 years. The majority of Arimpil's repertoire derived from him. Because Arimpil's father believed in Buddhism, he sent Arimpil to a lamasery. But the son was more fond of singing the heroic stories than of reciting Buddhist scripture. Arimpil also had the chance to practice *Janggar* in front of a native audience in his spare time through the 1950s and the early part of the 1960s. After 1980 he was invited to local singing pageants and also had the

---

[3] The *Janggar* epic cycle has been regarded as the Oirat peoples' national poetry. It matured in the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries, in other words, from the time the Oirat peoples moved to the Tian Shan Mountains and the Four Allies of Oirats appeared on the banks of the Volga in 1663. Another epic cycle, shared by both the Tibetan and Mongolian peoples, is the gigantic Gesar (Mongolians call it Geser) epic tradition, with a large number of cantos and many variants. Besides these two cycles, hundreds of large and small epic poems have been recorded during the twentieth century; some of them are more likely regional, while others extend more widely. For example, the epic Khan Kharangui is considered the source of the Mongolian epic, and its hero Khan Kharangui is thus known as the Epic Khan.

opportunity to visit Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang, and Beijing, where he sang *Janggar* for domestic and foreign scholars. He died in Hobagsair County on May 20, 1994.[4]

The South Slavic oral epic tradition is a vast conglomerate of regional and ethnic traditions that can productively be categorized as Moslem and Christian songs. Of course, the Balkans have seen enormous unrest and social change over the past 700-800 years, and the tradition reaches far beyond the former Yugoslavia to cognate epics in Bulgarian, Russian, and other Slavic languages. But we can frame our discussion usefully by concentrating on the Moslem and Christian epics performed in the language once called Serbo-Croatian and today spoken by residents of Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia. We will attempt to cover both types of South Slavic epic in this article, even if briefly, in order to give a truer picture of the whole genre.[5]

The chief collection of Christian oral epic was made mostly in Serbia by Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, a nineteenth-century ethnographer, linguist, and reformer of the two alphabets. Via a network of amanuenses around the country, he gathered written transcriptions of singers' performances, with special emphasis on the heroic deeds of the Serbian hero and mercenary Prince Marko and on the events surrounding the Battle of Kosovo in 1389, at which the Serbs were defeated by the Ottoman Empire. Unlike virtually all other nineteenth-century fieldworkers, Karadžić did not frequently intervene during the editorial process; for the most part, he published what the singers sang without addition, subtraction, or emendation. We will draw our examples of Christian epic from the second of his original four volumes of *narodne pjesme*, or "folk songs," which he entitled the "oldest heroic songs."[6]

The largest and most thorough collection of Moslem oral epic was the product of a research expedition undertaken by Milman Parry, an American specialist in ancient Greek epic, and his assistant Albert Lord, who was later to carry on Parry's analytical work. Their accomplishments would eventually produce what has come to be known as the Oral-Formulaic Theory.[7] In making the field trip to the former Yugoslavia, Parry and Lord were attempting to conduct an experiment: they wanted to test their hypothesis about Homer's orality in the "living laboratory" of South Slavic oral epic. For this purpose they sought the longer songs of the Moslem tradition, mainly from *guslari* ("singers") in Bosnia. We will take our examples of Moslem epic from this archive of materials, known as the Parry Collection of Oral Literature at Harvard University, drawing both from the publication series *Serbo-Croatian Heroic Songs*, which has so far presented performances from the Novi Pazar, Bijelo Polje, and Bihać areas, and from unpublished performances from the Stolac region in central Hercegovina.[8]

In turning to our two examples of oral-connected traditional epic, the ancient Greek and the Old English (or Anglo-Saxon), we will be analyzing poems that reach us only in manuscript

---

[4] Adapted from Chao Gejin 2000:120-24.

[5] On Moslem versus Christian epics, see Foley 1991:61-134, 1999b:37-111, and 2002:188-218.

[6] The standard edition is Karadžič 1841-62.

[7] On the Oral-Formulaic Theory, see Foley 1985 (online at http://www.oraltradition.org, with updates) and 1988.

[8] For published material, see *SCHS*; for unpublished materials, J. M. Foley wished to thank Stephen Mitchell, the Curator of the Milman Parry Collection.

form. While there is little question that these poems have a strong and vital link to oral tradition, the fact that they were recorded in the ancient and medieval periods means that we cannot ever be confident about the precise nature of that relationship. Without the opportunity to do fieldwork, much will remain uncertain. But scholarship generally supports the existence of ancient Greek and Old English oral epic traditions, and we find irrefutable evidence not just of the fact of that medium but of its importance for our understanding of the poems concerned.

Homer's epics—if indeed there ever was a real Homer rather than a legend assigned that name—probably stabilized in something like their extant form in about the sixth century BCE, or about two centuries after the invention of the Greek alphabet. We know very little about the history and transmission of the epics for the next 1500 years, that is, between their probable time of origin and the date of the first whole *Iliad* manuscript in the tenth century CE. The manuscript record includes many variants, and the partial texts preserved in fragmentary papyri offer additional witnesses to a variable, complex tradition. Nonetheless, research has established the structural importance of oral tradition for the Homeric texts, and our overview will proceed from the solid base of that scholarship. We will cite example lines and passages from the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, and related works from the Oxford editions,[9] and we will use the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*, a searchable CD-ROM that contains original-language texts of all ancient Greek works, as the key to unlock Homer's phraseology and narrative patterning.

Like Homer's works, the Old English poems stem from an oral tradition; also like Homer, they interacted with writing and texts in unknown ways between the time of their commission to manuscript (no later than the last third of the tenth century) and their modern rediscovery and edition in the nineteenth century. Approximately 32,000 lines of Anglo-Saxon poetry survive to our time; of that corpus, only *Beowulf* (3,182 lines) and the fragmentary *Waldere* are truly epic. But extended narrative poems—especially saints' lives or retellings of the Bible—abound, and the same kind of poetic line supports all of the surviving poetry. In practice, this means that different genres interact easily with other genres, so that phrases and motifs migrate readily from one type of poem to another. We will be quoting *Beowulf* and related poems from the standard collective edition, *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, and employing the Bessinger-Smith concordance to that edition in order to establish the recurrency of phrase and narrative unit.[10]

Question # 1: What Is a Poem in Oral Epic Tradition?

1. Mongolian

Janggar has always been the most prominent epic tradition in Mongolia, with the *Gesar* epic, which also lives in Tibetan epic tradition, the next most significant of many dozens of mostly interrelated oral epic traditions. To determine the nature and dynamics of a poem within such a large and complex tradition, it is necessary to grasp its fundamental organization. Instead of existing as freestanding parts or incomplete fragments, the "cantos" (*bölög*) of *Janggar* are

---

[9] See Monro and Allen 1969.

[10] See Krapp and Dobbie 1931-53; Bessinger and Smith 1978.

simultaneously two things: stories complete in themselves and also parts of a larger whole, to which scholars give the name of "cycle." One result of this organization is that most cantos can be combined in numerous different ways and in various sequences without acknowledging the real-world passage of time that we expect in novels, for example. In *Janggar* epic the heroes are always 25 years old, as are all the characters, and all four seasons are spring. Likewise, almost all cantos have a happy ending, returning to the same state of affairs with which the canto began; each unit both starts and ends with a feast.

To speak of a poem in Mongolian oral epic tradition thus involves a complicated set of assumptions. In one sense each canto is a poem: it tells a story with a beginning, middle, and end; it features one or a few heroes; and it follows one of a limited number of story-patterns (battle, wedding, bloodbrotherhood, or biography), or some combination of those patterns. But in another sense each canto is itself incomplete since it presumes knowledge of other *bölög*. Even though the singer may not actually perform those other cantos, the actions and characters that they involve are traditionally associated with what he happens at the moment to be singing. This larger, composite network of cantos—both those actually sung and those that remain implicit—is the cycle, equivalent to the unpublished book that contains all the chapters or the constellation that takes shape from all of the individual stars.[11] "A poem" is thus a slippery and contingent term; Mongolian epic tradition consists of performed parts of an implied, untextualized whole. A canto is "a poem," to be sure, but the cycle to which it always refers is also a poem.

Two perspectives—one story-based and the other scholarly—will give further evidence of this interactive, part-and-whole structure of "a poem" in the Mongolian *Janggar* tradition. First, the various cantos of the cycle seldom feature Janggar himself in the main heroic role; usually another subsidiary hero, often Honggur, undertakes the actual task or adventure. Janggar is, however, always present, and the singers explain his distance from the main action by citing him as a patron deity to the hero centrally involved in the action. Whatever the case, Janggar serves as the uniting focus for all of the disparate characters, the major link between and among their diversity, and the very naming of the entire cycle after him indicates his central prominence in the tradition as a whole. Correspondingly, scholars refer to the cantos and the cycle they study not as one or a series of items, and not by means of separate, carefully calibrated titles. Rather, they name the entire tradition by the hero's name, Janggar, again placing him at center-stage, locating him at the heart of the network. Citing particular editions is one thing; referring to the epic is quite another.

2. South Slavic

In some respects the answer to "What is a poem in South Slavic epic tradition?" will sound quite similar. Although each performance is to an extent complete in itself, each also remains contingent—dependent not only on an implied constellation of stories and characters but

---

[11] The singer Arimpil himself indicates this underlying network at various places in his repertoire. Cf. Vladimirtsov (1983-84:17-18), who observes that "the fact of the matter is that Janggar has far more internal similarity of action of the separate song-poems; they are linked not only by internal connection (by one and the same Khan), each of them is a natural continuation, a development of the preceding; contradictions almost never arise; the singer performing any given song calls others to mind, he sketches them on a distant background."

on the particular circumstances of the individual performance, singer, and audience. That is, every poem is inherently linked to other poems, and what emerges in any single instance will always amount to one of myriad possible instances. We textualize this kind of natural multiformity at our peril.

In the case of the Christian tradition, in which the performance-texts are relatively short (seldom exceeding 250 lines), poems behave like "chapters" in an unwritten "book." Adventures in different poems are loosely tied together, if at all, and direct reference to prior or parallel events or biographical specifics is very rare. Rather, the parts become a whole by simple agglutination in audience experience, with the listener or reader drawing the connections between and among "chapters" that the tradition leaves inexplicit. Do you wonder why Prince Marko loses his temper with the Turkish tsar, defiantly placing his boots on the Moslem leader's prayer-rug in the single poem called "Marko Drinks Wine at Ramazan"? Then you need to know that it is in Marko's personality to be hotheaded, to act impulsively when challenged; you also need to know that he takes great enjoyment in disobeying the ruler for whom he fights as an unwilling mercenary. None of this information is contained in the poem you are reading, however, so depending exclusively on that performance-text will leave you without evidence for the hero's motivation. Only by bringing these other implied "chapters" into consideration—by consulting the unspoken context attached to Prince Marko as a character who lives beyond any single poem—will his behavior make any sense.

The Moslem tradition of longer epic, which can run to ten thousand lines and more, also exists in an implied network of mythology and story. Once again characterization and events are larger than any single performance-text, and once again our understanding of South Slavic epic will fall short if we focus only on the single instance at the expense of the much larger unspoken context. But there are other factors involved as well. In the Moslem tradition, epics are not so much chapters in a single unpublished book as a shelf of books that belong to a single series treating a single subject. More complete in themselves, the Moslem songs follow particular story-patterns—such as Return, Rescue, Wedding, and Siege of a City. We can describe them as belonging to a huge cycle of stories as long as we clearly understand that their primary reference or linkage is not to each other but rather to the tradition at large. Contingent on the aims and day-to-day realities associated with different singers and audiences, these longer epic performances overlap one another in structure and content. Thus, Mustajbey of the Lika will always be treacherous, but exactly what shape his treachery takes depends on which story-pattern (as well as particular story) lies underneath the narration. Likewise, Tale of Orašac will idiomatically seem like a lazy and selfish buffoon even as he proves indispensable to any Turkish army's encounter with the Christian enemy, but we do not come to translate his unpromising appearance because of any single poem. Tradition operates on a larger canvas in the case of Moslem epic.

3. Ancient Greek

With the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* we enter the realm of oral epics that today survive only in manuscript. That is, although both historical and internal evidence point toward an origin and currency in oral tradition, the exact relationship between the poems and their tradition will always lie outside our certain knowledge. For that reason, the question of "What is a poem in

ancient Greek oral tradition?" must be answered by piecing together different kinds of materials: the two major works themselves and the other poems, fragments, and summaries that reach us from more than two millennia ago.

That evidence collectively indicates a thriving epic tradition from at least 1200 BCE, with the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* being recorded in textual form no earlier than the invention of the Greek alphabet about 775 BCE. Evidence of other poems about the Trojan War and the heroes involved in it can be found in references made by ancient authors to such epics as the *Cypria*, the *Aethiopis*, the *Nostoi*, and so forth, as well as quoted fragments of these poems. These lost works form the so-called Epic Cycle,[12] which some scholars understand as a well-organized and interlocking series of accounts surrounding the Trojan War and other analysts see as a looser constellation of orally performed stories that were later recorded in writing. Together with the poems of Hesiod (especially the *Theogony* and the *Works and Days*), the Epic Cycle indicates that a great deal was going on in the ancient Greek epic tradition in addition to performance of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the two poems that we ascribe to the probably legendary Homer.

What seems to have happened in the decades and centuries following the invention of writing is the gradual establishment of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as the "canon" of ancient Greek epic. That fossilization of a living oral tradition into only two texts has obscured our vision of a dynamic traditional process and led to some unfortunate assumptions. First, it was not until Milman Parry's initial investigations of the 1930's that western scholarship began to realize that these were originally oral poems. From Parry's analysis a comparative field quickly emerged, affecting dozens of different traditions around the world, and yet the full impact of the Homeric epics' oral traditional genesis and context was not to be felt for many years. Only recently have scholars come to grips with the reality that—as oral (or oral-derived) poems—the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* must also be understood differently. They are individual poems, to be sure, but they also share traditional elements and strategies such as formulas, typical scenes, and narrative patterns both with each other and with poems like the Homeric Hymns.[13] Therefore, trying to understand the nature of an individual poem in the ancient Greek tradition is similar to attempting to project the nature of prehistoric life from fossils. The best we can do is to remain aware of the dynamics and expressive usefulness of the features we can recognize—formulas, typical scenes, and narrative patterns. Analogies from living oral traditions such as Mongolian and South Slavic are crucially important in this effort.

4. Old English

The question of "What is a poem?" provokes a series of answers in relation to Old English or Anglo-Saxon poetry. First, as mentioned briefly above, these poems derive from an oral tradition brought to England by Germanic settlers from about 450 CE onward, but the exact relationship between the manuscripts that survive and this long-lost oral tradition must remain uncertain. Second, and much more so than ancient Greek, for example, the Old English materials are very different from one another by genre. Within the 32,000 extant lines, we find

---

[12] See Davies 1989 and Foley 1999a on cycles.

[13] For examples, see Foley 1995:136-80 and 1999b:115-237.

approximately 10% epic (chiefly *Beowulf*), with the other 90% consisting of elegies, charms, riddles, lives of saints, histories, Biblical stories, and other forms. Focusing on the epic, we find that *Beowulf* has no direct parallels in Old English, although it shares mythology and poetic style with Germanic poems in medieval languages such as Old Norse, Old Saxon, and Old and Middle High German. From all of this disparate evidence it seems that *Beowulf* was part of a pan-Germanic oral tradition of which very little actually survives to us.

Even though the genre of epic and the story of *Beowulf* are very rarely paralleled, the Old English poetic style is well attested. Unlike many other traditions, all Anglo-Saxon poems—no matter what their genres—share the same meter and, to some extent, the same poetic diction. Thus, traditional units such as typical scenes and formulas occur across the spectrum from one narrative form to another (for example, *Beowulf* and the Biblical stories share the theme of Sea Voyage as well as formulas for ships, heroes, and so forth). Even non-narrative genres such as charms and riddles draw on the same phraseology as does epic. As a result, *Beowulf* is suspended in a network of formulaic and narrative patterns that can be observed in other genres; in other words, all genres depend on the same traditional register. As we saw in relation to Mongolian, South Slavic, and ancient Greek works, Old English poems are both complete in themselves and yet idiomatically linked to a much larger network of structure and implication.

Question # 2: What Is a Typical Scene or Theme in an Oral Poetic Tradition?

1. Mongolian

Albert Lord defines *themes* or typical scenes as multiform narrative units, as "groups of ideas regularly used in telling a tale in the formulaic style of traditional song" (Lord 1960:68). In the Oral-Formulaic model, these are building blocks of story, flexible in themselves, that can be molded to suit their immediate narrative environment. Thus, the same theme serves many singers, and many songs, as a sort of "large word" or unit of utterance in the oral epic vocabulary. Indeed, as we shall see below, the South Slavic epic bards and their counterparts in other traditions think of "words" as just such integral units, and not as lexical entries in dictionaries. Simply put, the theme is a story-byte, a tale-telling increment.

Many cantos in Mongolian epic follow a fairly stable series of events, starting from a stock beginning with citation of the time, a Golden Age, and the famous place in which the action is set. The canto then continues with a description of the hero's remarkable horse as well as his aide or companion before a subsequent threat emerges in one of many forms, including attacking monsters, invading armies, and the like. Depending on the particular story-pattern, a maiden may be involved; if the maiden is captured and the homeland ruined, the hero will be called upon to rescue and restore them. Fighting against a monster or another hero is often implicated, and victory over a human adversary may bring that adversary over to the hero's side. A wedding can follow, and the story comes to closure with the hero's return home.

However the individual canto of *Janggar* proceeds, it regularly begins with a theme or typical scene that we can call the Palace Scene. Based on available evidence, the only exception to this rule occurs when the information contained in this theme is assumed already to be part of

the audience's prior knowledge. The Palace Scene consists of Janggar together with his 6,012 warriors drinking and singing boisterously, with Janggar astride a bench with 44 legs. Typically, the singer mentions that Janggar's face looks like a full moon. Depending on the version, the Palace Scene may be very brief. In other cases, the singer may include elaborate detail about the grandeur and opulence of the dining hall: its great height (15 stories and attached to the sky) and its decoration with animal skins, gems, gold and silver, and so on. Other adjustments can include a detailed physical description of Janggar, an account of his early childhood deprivation or other aspects of his biography, or his unique horse, sometimes with a biography of the horse as well. The length and elaboration or brevity and starkness of the Palace Scene theme are functions of the singer's ability and performance situation and of the audience's reception.[14] The idiomatic presence of this starting element provides evidence of how the singer and audience conceive of the individual canto as an entire world in itself—the single instance complete with a larger implied background—rather than as a fragmented, freestanding folktale.

Within the *Janggar* cycle the same typical scene can vary substantially from one singer to another, with differences in characters, description, and smaller details that depend on the particular bard's version of the given canto. The song-to-song morphology is even greater, however, since a given typical scene can be linked to a long series of other narrative patterns, producing a lengthy canto, or connected to a relatively brief series, in which case its form will be briefer.[15] On the other hand, the actual formulaic language in which typical scenes are expressed changes more from one singer to another than from one song to another. There is, in other words,

---

[14] Here are two instances of the Palace Scene:

Example 1 (Arimpil [Taya 1999:64]):

Arban tabun dabhur	Inside the 15-story
Altan čarlig bambalai dotur-a	Golden shining palace
Aldar noyan Janggar ni tolugailagad	Famous ruler Janggar, the head,
Araja-yin naiman minggan bagatur-ud ni	And his 8,000 Araja warriors
Dagulaldun nayirlaju bayital-a	Are singing and feasting

Example 2 (Arimpil [Taya 1999:18-19]):

Aru bey-e-yi ni	[The palace's] rear side
Arslang-un soyug-a-bar	Lion's canine teeth
Sihan daramalan boshagsan	Were placed upward,
Emün-e bey-e-yi ni	Front side,
Ölü manghan bugu	Remote Gobi deer
Jagan hoyar-un soyuga-bar	And elephant teeth
Sihan daramalan boshagsan	Were placed upward
Jegün bey-e-yi ni	At the east side,
Usun sil-iyer	Water-mirrors
Önggelen boshagsan	Stood with colors,
Baragun bey-e-yi ni	At the west side
Badmarag-a Erdeni čilagu-bar	Precious rubies
Sihan daramalan boshagsan	Were placed upward,
gadanah-i dörben önčüg-i ni	The outside four corners
gal sil uglan barigsan	Fire-mirrors were built

[15] For example, consider two versions of the same canto, *The Wedding of Honggur*, sung by Bosugomji and Li Purbai (*JMC*). The two songs are roughly similar, while their length and constituent scenes are apparently different. For further discussion, see Rinchindorji 1999:238-43.

a sense in which traditional phraseology consists of traditional idiolects. But while individual epic poets may use slightly different diction as they work through different parts of their repertoires, different singers depart from one another in many more ways, furnishing evidence of traditional dialects within the specialized epic language.[16]

Within any singer's inventory, certain typical scenes are linked to specific story-patterns. For example, the theme of the hero's shapeshifting into a pauper and changing his proud steed into a shabby, two-year-old colt is associated with cantos following the overall pattern of winning a maiden. The typical scene thus helps to predict what will happen: it provides a kind of map for the epic journey. To take another example, a messenger arriving at a feast when all present are singing and drinking indicates that eventually the story will turn toward battle as its major subject. Or consider the typical scene of the hero or his wife suffering through a nightmare, which betokens a threat of some sort, often an invasion, and again eventually a battle. In all of these cases the typical scene is more than a cipher, more than an item or tectonic strategy; it foretells future events, reveals the direction of the story-pattern.[17]

2. South Slavic

The sketch of the typical scene given above corresponds closely to the realities of South Slavic epic, which of course furnished the original data for the Oral-Formulaic model. As with Mongolian narrative we find the singer, or *guslar*, thinking and expressing himself in terms of what he calls *reči*, or "words," by which he means "units of utterance" rather than typographically defined words. For the South Slavic oral epic singer, "words" are never as small and partial as printed units, whether Chinese characters or European groups of letters. Instead, *reči* are tale-telling increments—as small as a phrase, as large as an entire performance or the story-pattern that underlies it, or as action-centered as a typical scene. The *guslar* composes in "words," not words.[18]

Typical scenes vary widely in length, detail, and flexibility in South Slavic epic. As we might logically expect, the shorter compass of the Christian songs means that fewer typical scenes are found across a variety of text-performances; since the expressive style of these narratives is spare and direct, such scenes, which can exceed hundreds of lines by themselves, are simply not as useful in composition. When they do occur, the shorter format makes for a briefer unit, as well as restricts song-to-song variability somewhat. To put it proverbially, Christian South Slavic epic is more the product of line-length and performance-length "words" than of typical scenes.

---

[16] For example, in the typical scene "Encounter a stranger," the singer Arimpil uses "Nigur tala-ban gal tai / nidün tala-ban čog tai" ("with fire on your cheeks / with embers in your eyes"), while in the epic *Gants Modon Honogtoi*, the dialectal variant is "nüürendee galtai / nüdendee tsogtoi / shilendee ööhtei / shilbendee chömögtei" ("with fire in your face / with embers in your eyes / with fat on the nape of your neck / with marrow bones in your shin"). See further Chao Gejin 2000:207.

[17] See further our discussion of *register* in Question 5 below.

[18] For a discussion of what the epic singers mean by "words," together with their own comments, see Foley 2002:11-21.

That is emphatically not the case with Moslem epic, whose style depends crucially on narrative units that belong not to one or a few but to many songs, taking many different forms according to the influence of story-pattern, specific story, singer, and individual performance.[19] If a *guslar* is singing a story of Return, for example, he must know how to use the "words" we can call "Shouting in prison" and "Readying the horse." The first of these tells how the long-lost hero, separated from his family and his people for years, laments so loudly that he keeps the entire town awake all night. Worst of all, his shrieking prevents his captor's baby son from sleeping and thereby endangers the boy's health; if nothing is done to quiet the prisoner, the captor's wife warns, the infant will die and the royal line will be extinguished. However the particular story may go, whatever the prisoner, captor, and others happen to be named, and regardless of exactly how many nights the intolerable lamenting goes on, the general shape of the typical scene of "Shouting in prison" is roughly the same. Beneath its superficial variation, it is the same "word."

Likewise with "Readying the horse," a description of how a hero prepares his or her horse for the inevitable journey found not only in Return narratives but in other kinds of Moslem epics as well. Here the action usually starts with the hero running down to the stable and leading the animal out into the courtyard, where an extensive cleaning and grooming process takes place. Of course, just how extensive the *guslar* makes it depends on a host of situational factors, but common elements include washing the horse's coat and rubbing him down with a goatskin pouch. After these preliminaries the singer continues with a description of the blanket, saddle, bridle, and reins—usually in that order—before closing the unit with some notation of the animal's ability to prance around the courtyard without a rider to direct its actions. In his performance of *The Wedding of Mustajbey's Son Bećirbey*,[20] the singer Halil Bajgorić added a simile to this last section, comparing a careless young shepherdess to the riderless horse. But whatever form the typical scene may take in the hands of this or that singer on this or that occasion, its structure and content are idiomatic features of South Slavic epic. Without such items of traditional vocabulary, a *guslar* cannot fluently compose his song. Nor, as we shall see in answering Question 5 on register, can an audience fully understand that song.

3. Ancient Greek

Typical scenes in Homeric epic include such recurrent passages as Feasting, Assembly, Arming the Hero, Lament, and many more. Although we are limited to about 28,000 lines in the surviving corpus of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, that sample is sufficient to observe how some of these scenes work. The typical scene of Feasting, for example, occurs no fewer than 35 times over the two poems, 32 of them in the *Odyssey* alone.[21] As a "large word" in the poet's compositional vocabulary, each instance includes four flexible parts: the act of seating the guest(s), the serving of food and drink, a line or two marking the satisfaction of the feasters and the closure of the

---

[19] See further Foley 1990:278-328.

[20] An edition of his performance in available in Foley 2004.

[21] See further Foley 1999b:171-87.

meal, and an impending mediation or solution of a problem. Whatever the geographical location, whatever the identity of the host and guest(s), and whatever the particular moment in the story, these elements are always present. Like other traditional units, the Feasting scene is a nexus for convention and unique detail; it meshes an expectable frame of reference and the particular moment at hand.

Another example of a typical scene in Homer is the Lament, which occurs six times in the *Iliad*.[22] In this pattern a woman is mourning the death of a fallen warrior, either her husband, her son, or someone with whom she has had a deep and longstanding relationship. The basic sequence is in three parts: an address to the fallen hero, a narrative of their personal history and the consequences of his death for those left behind, and a final and intimate re-address of the hero. This form underlies passages as different as Andromache's and Helen's laments for the fallen Hektor, for instance, or Briseis' mourning for the slain Patroklos. Since each lamenter's relationship to the hero (and there are of course different heroes involved as well) is by definition unique, the typical scene must leave ample room for variation. At the same time, it must also be cohesive and focused enough to be useful compositionally and expressively. As we shall see below in the answer to Question 5, the typical scenes of Lament and Feasting are aspects of the traditional epic register, and as such they also add idiomatic implications whenever they appear.

4. Old English

In Anglo-Saxon narrative poetry, themes or typical scenes work somewhat differently than in the other three poetries. Although scenes such as Sea Voyage, Exile, and the Beasts of Battle reveal a consistent sequence of ideas, their individual instances do not correspond as closely as in other oral epic traditions. What varies is the line-to-line texture of the instances, a phenomenon that results from the differing nature for formulaic structure in Old English, as described below in the answers to Questions 3 and 4.

One of the most thoroughly studied scenes in Old English is that of Exile.[23] Critics have shown that it consists of four basic elements: status, deprivation, state of mind, and movement in or into exile. In other words, this narrative pattern begins with description of a character's loss of social and/or familial status. It should be stressed that separation from the network of society and family in Anglo-Saxon is a crippling condition, one that leads to complete loss of identity. Nothing worse can happen to a person in the poetry. The typical scene then continues with a statement of exactly what the character has left behind, often including the Anglo-Saxon formulaic system "X *bidæled*" ("deprived of X") or an equivalent as a marker for this stage. The third element focuses on the exiled figure's state of mind, which is of course very sad and quite hopeless. Finally, the theme closes with some notation of movement (always negative) in which the principal character's woes deepen or at least his or her condition fails to improve. Importantly, this typical scene is applied to a wide range of different characters: the protagonists in *The Seafarer* and *The Wanderer*, two lyric poems, are exiles, as is Grendel in *Beowulf*. Like so

---

[22] See further Foley 1991:168-74.

[23] See further Foley 1990:330-31.

many other traditional structures in Anglo-Saxon oral-derived poetry, the Exile theme crosses generic boundaries, occurring in epic and non-epic genres.

The Sea Voyage offers us another example of a typical scene, this time a pattern found chiefly in *Beowulf*.[24] We can describe it as a sequence of five elements, again with very flexible line-to-line composition: the hero leads his men to the ship; the ship waits, moored; the men board the ship, carrying treasure; the ship departs, sails, and arrives; and the ship is moored and the men meet a coast-guard in the new land. This theme occurs twice in *Beowulf,* once when the hero journeys from his home in Geatland to Hrothgar's territory in Denmark and again on Beowulf's return trip. Each time the five-part outline provides the basic structure for the action, moving the hero across the sea via a traditional and recognizable series of actions. A third instance seems to occur at the very beginning of the poem with the ship-burial of Scyld Scefing, a legendary hero long before Beowulf's era. In narrating the Anglo-Saxon funeral rite of burying the hero in a sailing ship with treasures alongside him, the poet of *Beowulf* appears to be using the same typical scene with appropriate modifications. In the answer to Question 5 as applied to Old English, we will see that this is more than just a convenient ploy designed to take advantage of a ready-made compositional structure; it is also a clever artistic strategy.

Question # 3: What Is a Poetic Line in Oral Epic Tradition?

1. Mongolian

The Mongolian poetic line is a subject that has not been addressed by either native or foreign scholars from the perspective of comparative oral epic prosody. In fact, we need to start by observing that the performances sometimes include both poetry and prose, and in that way are parallel to other traditions whose hybrid medium is called prosimetrum.[25] As a general rule, the more capable and experienced singers compose entirely or almost entirely in poetry, while the more amateurish and less experienced performers depend on prose to a greater degree. As for the texture of individual songs, highly traditional elements such as typical scenes will tend to be sung as poetry regardless of who performs them, while prose emerges between these units as the bard pushes his narrative forward. From within the singing tradition, poetry is understood as the "original" medium: as the bard Jonggarab observed during fieldwork, "In olden days singers sang their songs; nowadays they speak their stories [in prose]."[26]

The onset of poetry in Mongolian epic is marked in a number of ways, with some features appearing in every line as a condition of metricality and others occurring regularly but not as a required constituent of each verse. Among required features we include the melodies of voice and instrument, which are integral parts of the line in performance although they are usually not transferred to texts. For *Janggar* epic, the most common accompanying instrument is

---

[24] See further Foley 1990:336-44.

[25] For a crosscultural view, see Harris and Reichl 1997.

[26] Chao Gejin 2000:312.

a *topšuur*, a two-stringed, lute-shaped instrument that is strummed by the singer as he produces his vocal melody.[27] This is a crucial dimension of the poetic line as a performative entity. As in South Slavic oral epic, to remove the phraseology from its musical context is to delete an important and defining dimension of what a poetic line is. Given the textual medium in which we are presenting these ideas, we must be content with characteristics that can be presented and discussed on the page, but we start by acknowledging the very prominent feature that this approach necessarily leaves out.

Hand in hand with the musical aspect goes another feature that recurs in every poetic line: the vocal pause between verses that defines the boundaries of the unit. In performance the Mongolian epic singer makes a clear break between lines by hesitating briefly before continuing with the next verse. As with Native American poetry, an important measure of line structure and integrity is thus the breath-group, the spoken unit delimited by pauses. The succession of words that the singer isolates and foregrounds in this way is coincident with the succession of words defined by the vocal and instrumental music, so that the breath-group and musical unit are best understood as different but coordinated symptoms of the same reality. For the purposes of the poetic line and its definition, the two dimensions are superimposable.

Most lines of *Janggar* epic exhibit a characteristic parallelism with its nearby counterparts, an arrangement that produces an additive structure common in a wide variety of oral epic poetries, including those we treat in this paper. The side-by-side, paratactic structure of the lines leads to a lack of necessary enjambment and also more generally to an overall organization in which the poetic line is usually complete in itself. Lines may be continued into the next verse-unit by apposition, enlargement, coordinate structures, and the like, but there is also an integrity to each line-unit that identifies it as expressively complete in itself.

In addition to these required features, the poetic line also depends for its definition on characteristics that recur regularly and symptomatically if not in every verse. Foremost among these second-level features is sound-patterning, which falls into a number of types. Very prominent is the aspect called head-rhyme, or initial rhyme between lines. This acoustic bridge connects lines in a series, and seems to act as a mnemonic: verses that are related in this kind of latticework are more stable and less subject to change from one performance to another. The following passage illustrates the phenomenon of head-rhyme:

<u>Ama</u>-tai hümün	People who have mouths
<u>Ama</u>laju bolusi ügei	Dare not to gossip [about him];
<u>Hele</u>-tei yagum-a	Creatures that have tongues
<u>Hele</u>jü bolusi ügei	Dare not to talk [about him],
<u>Hüm</u>ün-ü način	Eagle among the masses,
<u>Hün</u>dü gar-tai Sabar	Mighty-armed Sabar.

---

[27] *The New Grove Dictionary* (Sadie 1980:q.v.) defines the *topshuur* (Topšuur) as a "two-stringed plucked lute used to accompany heroic epics in contemporary west Mongolia. Two-string lutes have been associated with the Mongols since Marco Polo's description of instruments played before battle in the 13th century. There is evidence to suggest that Kalmyk Mongols used a three-string lute during the 17th century and that they were also used to accompany epics."

Correspondingly, the feature of *tail-rhyme*, or rhyme that involves successive line-ends, also helps to bind successive verses together. In this case the pattern takes advantage of the preferred location of verbs in the final position in the verse, with similarly inflected verbs producing morphological rhyme:

Utul<u>hul-a</u>	When to be incised,
Ulagan čilagun <u>boldag</u>	It turns to be red rock;
Čabči<u>hul-a</u>	When to be cleaved,
Čagan čilagun <u>boldag</u>	It turns to be white rock.

Sound-patterning can also take the form of *intralinear alliteration*, with as many as four words per line participating in the matrix:

<u>B</u>aga <u>b</u>ičihan <u>b</u>agatur <u>b</u>ayin-a   Little young hero to be

or of *assonance* or internal rhyme, which binds the line together via a recurring vowel sound:

Arb<u>an</u> luu-yin čahilg<u>an</u> gilbalj<u>an</u> bayiba   Ten dragons' lightning flare.

In that connection it is interesting to note that assonance builds on the natural language characteristic of vowel harmony in Mongolian. Indeed, this is an obvious but sometimes overlooked rule of thumb for all of the oral epic traditions we examine here: the structure of the poetic line, and therefore of the phraseology that is in symbiosis with that line, depends directly on the nature of the given language in which the line occurs. This is the reason that universalist definitions of poetic lines and phraseologies are of such limited usefulness.

In the spirit of comparison and contrast, let us also mention some features familiar from Western (especially Greco-Roman) poetries that do not apply to the Mongolian poetic line. For one thing, there is no syllabic constraint to speak of. Within our sample a line can range in length from four to eleven syllables, with the different configurations being sung according to the same rhythm and melody. Second, there is no ictus or metrical stress. Instead of the kind of stress-based pattern that underlies a trochee or iamb, for example, Mongolian epic follows the natural-language reflex of initially accented words. That is, it is the linguistic stress on the opening syllables of successive words that produces the impression of trochees, but that impression is an illusion. Finally, the word-order in the Mongolian epic line is as a rule no different from the order of elements in the everyday language. Once again the explanation seems to lie in the natural dynamics of the language. Since Mongolian is chiefly an analytic language, dependent to a substantial degree on word-sequence rather than inflection, it tends to maintain a regular order. By dismissing such irrelevant features as syllabicity, stress, and alternate word order, we can focus more clearly on what really matters about the poetic line in *Janggar* epic: music, breath-groups, parallelism, and sound-patterning. Moreover, with such distinctions in hand, we may perhaps be more prepared for the necessarily disparate definitions of the epic line in South Slavic, ancient Greek, and Old English.

2. South Slavic

The epic poems of the *guslari* depend principally on the so-called *epski deseterac*, or epic decasyllable.[28] As the name implies, the poetic line consists of ten syllables, but that is not its only—or even its most important—dimension. The verse form also has internal organization and performative characteristics, and these features are crucial to understanding its symbiosis with traditional phraseology.

Internally, the *deseterac* consist of two parts, called cola, of four and six syllables, as in the following examples:

Rano rani Djedjelez Alija   Djerdjelez Alija arose early,

I Alija, careva gazija   Even Alija, the tsar's hero

Word-break always occurs between the fourth and fifth syllables, and normally the two cola that are formed by that break are complete grammatical units. Of course, they can and do combine with the other colon in a variety of ways, but each colon is independent to the extent that it can combine with other cola. For instance, singers can use the metrical phraseology to introduce other heroes—"Rano rani lički Mustajbeže" ("Mustajbey of the Lika arose early") or "I Alija, više Sarajeva" ("Even Alija, above the city of Sarajevo") would be alternate realizations of the same patterns.

In addition to its four-plus-six syllabic base, the South Slavic poetic line shows other kinds of structure. Originally, scholars thought that it was trochaic (that it consisted of five feet with trochaic stress: / x), but this schema has proved to be an illusion generated by an irrelevant Greco-Roman model. In fact, stress occurs primarily on syllables 3 and 9, and somewhat less regularly on syllables 1 and 5; syllable 7 is usually unstressed. Accordingly, there are bridges or zeugmata between syllables 3-4 and 9-10 where word-break is prohibited and where in-line rhyme occasionally appears. An example of these features is:

U be*ćar*a nema hizme*ćar*a   For a bachelor there is no maidservant

Syllables 3 and 9, both -*ćar*-, bear stress in the line, and they also rhyme. The stress is a necessary and defining feature of the South Slavic epic line, as is the lack of a word-break between 3-4 and 9-10; the in-line rhyme is an optional feature that occurs approximately once or twice every fifty lines, particularly in proverbs.

Along with formal characteristics such as decasyllabic definition, the two cola of four and six syllables, stress, and bridges, the *deseterac* also has a musical definition. Most epics in the Moslem tradition, and many in the Christian tradition, are sung to the accompaniment of a musical instrument called the *gusle*. This is a single-stringed, bowed, lute-shaped instrument that singers use not just to ornament but to help voice their performances; the vocal melody follows the pattern of the instrumental melody and is a crucial dimension of the epic. For example, at times the singer begins the ten-syllable line with a vocal pause, allowing the instrument alone to

---

[28] See further Foley 1990:85-106.

contribute the first one or two syllables of the *deseterac* and only beginning to sing after that vocal rest. Here is an example from Halil Bajgorić's *The Wedding of Mustajbey's Son Bećirbey*:

[X] Zavika Djulić u Nuhane   [Pause] Djulić u Nuhane began to shout

In most other instances, singers begin this line with *I* ("And") or *Tad* ("Then"), forming a full ten-syllable increment. But at times they do as Bajgorić has done here, pausing for a single syllable (or more) and effectively using the music to help make the poetic line. This is a difficult and unfamiliar lesson for those of us trained to understand poetry and the poetic line as a textual phenomenon in which "the words are primary," but in performance the non-textualized aspects of the poetic line can often play a crucial role that texts are not well equipped to represent.

3. Ancient Greek

The poetic line in Homeric epic is a very complex instrument, but we can gain a basic understanding of how it works rather quickly by considering both its "external" and its "internal" structure.[29] From an external perspective it amounts to a dactylic hexameter, that is, six feet of the shape $-\cup\cup$, or long-short-short, with occasional substitution of spondees ($--$, or long-long). Thus, lines can have different numbers of syllables, theoretically from 12 to 17 since the final foot is always a two-syllable spondee. According to this point of view, then, the line is composed of six metrical units; the closure of the hexameter is rhythmically marked by the fifth foot usually being a dactyl and the sixth foot always being a spondee ($-\cup\cup$ followed by $--$). No contemporary metrical or musical notation survives, so we must be content with this kind of textual analysis.

The viewpoint from internal metrics is, however, much clearer. According to this perspective, the poetic line in ancient Greek oral-derived epic is composed of four unequal parts. Instead of the six feet, then, we have four cola, and each of the four cola turns out to be a common length for a Homeric formula. In other words, the unit of the colon in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* is the metrical basis for formulaic structure. Whereas the external measure of six feet does not correlate with the system of traditional diction, the internal dynamics of four cola helps to explain how *aoidoi* (ancient Greek epic singers) actually made their lines. Here is a simplified diagram of how the four cola work:

$-\cup\cup/-/\cup\cup-/\cup/\cup-/\cup\cup/-\cup\cup--$
       A1 A2   B1 B2   C1   C2

The slashes (/) mark the possible word-divisions in the poetic line. Each of the three word-breaks must occur at one of two possible positions (either A1 or A2 for the first, B1 or B2 for the second, and C1 or C2 for the third), yielding three divisions and four parts in every line. Colon 1 thus extends from the beginning of the line to A1 or A2, the second colon from A1 or A2 to B1 or

---

[29] See further Foley 1990:68-84.

B2, and so forth. In its combination of structure and flexibility, the Homeric poetic line acts as a functional partner to ancient Greek epic phraseology, the subject of Question 4 below.

4. Old English

The poetic line of *Beowulf* is quite unlike the lines of the other three epic traditions, and in this difference we can see how traditional regularity can take different forms within the various sets of rules that underlie different oral and oral-derived poetries.[30] First and foremost, the Anglo-Saxon poetic line does not depend on syllable-count: the verses in *Beowulf* have between 8 and 16 syllables, and there is no systemic pattern to their various lengths. This means in turn that the phenomenon of cola (as in ancient Greek and South Slavic) is irrelevant, and more generally that any feature deriving from syllabic regularity is impertinent. Also, although there is mention in *Beowulf* and other poems of an accompanying instrument, as well as archaeological evidence of its existence, we know nothing about the role of vocal or instrumental music in the performance of this traditional poetry.

What *does* characterize the Old English poetic line? The two primary features are alliteration and stress. Similarly to the Mongolian line, the Anglo-Saxon unit is defined in part by a sequence of matched initial sounds, as in the following examples. We have marked the alliterative sound by underlining it in each line, as well as indicating the sound in brackets (*Beowulf*, lines 51-54):

<u>s</u>ecgan to <u>s</u>oðe, <u>s</u>elerædende,	[s]
<u>h</u>æleð under <u>h</u>eofenum, hwa Þæm <u>h</u>læste onfeng.	[h]
Ða wæs on <u>b</u>urgum <u>B</u>eowulf Scyldinga,	[b]
<u>l</u>eof <u>l</u>eodcyning <u>l</u>onge Þrage.	[l]

truth to tell, hall-counselors,
heroes under the heavens, who received that burden.
Then in the strongholds was Beowulf of the Scyldings,
Beloved people-king for a long time.

Notice that the poet includes at least one matching sound in each half-line, and there are often two such sounds in the first half-line. Without such alliteration the poetic line is flawed; it is an absolute requirement of the verse-form and participates actively in the composition and systematic usage of formulas. These examples also illustrate how the poetic line divides into two halves, each unit containing a varying number of syllables. The alliterative meter, as it is called, is thus a two-level meter: it is organized in both whole lines and half-lines.

The other chief feature of the alliterative meter is stress, or emphasis (what linguists call "ictus"). Germanic languages are collectively stress-based, and Old English is no exception, with four major emphases in each poetic line and favored patterns of ictus throughout the line. This regularity contrasts with the irregularity of syllable-count, providing an organization based on

---

[30] See further Foley 1990:106-19.

emphasis rather than sequences of syllables or cola. For example, the first of the lines quoted above features stresses on the alliterating syllables and on –ræd-, the root of –rædende:

      /   /   /   /
    secgan to soðe,   selerædende,

Both features—stress-patterns and alliteration—characterize not only epic but also non-epic poetries. As mentioned earlier in regard to typical scenes, Anglo-Saxon tradition units are shared across the boundaries of genre.

In addition to alliteration and stress, the structure of the Old English poetic line leads to frequent parataxis, apposition, and enjambment. The poets have the opportunity to continue their thought beyond the extent of a single line, often adding one phrase to another in multi-line sequences of independently viable, highly flexible increments. Clearly, its unique set of rules allows for much more variation than either the South Slavic or ancient Greek poetic lines, and more than the Mongolian line as well. This relative freedom from encapsulation has significant implications for the kind of formulaic structure that can arise and be maintained in Anglo-Saxon poetry.

Question # 4: What Is a Formula in an Oral Poetic Tradition?

1. Mongolian

Perhaps the most direct way to begin discussion of the formula, or traditional phrase, and its identity in Mongolian epic is to quote Milman Parry's foundational concept: "a group of words regularly used under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea."[31] With this definition Parry was pointing the way toward a composite unit of expression or utterance more extensive than the words we use; he focused instead on what we might call "larger words" as the basis of the singer's compositional ability. For instance, the ancient Greek heroes are time and again called by noun-epithet formulas such as "swift-footed Achilles" or "goddess grey-eyed Athena." Each of these combinations acts as a unit, each one fits into a particular segment of the Homer's poetic line, and each conveys a simple idea (in the two cases above, simply "Achilles" and "Athena").

Noun-epithet formulas in *Janggar* epic can range from one to five lines, and multiple formulas can be added to produce a traditional sequence of attributes as long as six or more verses. This is a flexibility beyond that of the other three traditions examined later on in this paper. For example, here is a one-line formula describing Honggur:

    Asuru ulagan Honggur   Giant Red Honggur

Compare a two-line phrase for the same hero:

_____

[31] Parry 1971:272.

Aguu yehe hüčü tei	Very great strength,
Asuru ulagan Honggur	Giant Red Honggur

and a five-line version:

Agčim-un jagua-r du	The moment eyes blinking,
Arban gurba hubildag	Transfigured 13 times,
Amin bey-e düni ügei	His anima is out of the body,
Aguu yehe hüčü tei	Very great strength,
Asuru ulagan Honggur	Giant Red Honggur

Along with affording the singer great flexibility in his performance, and despite their obvious differences, these phrases share some core qualities. For one thing, the name "Honggur" occurs at the end of the last verse, regardless of how many verses the formula has. That is, its position illustrates the typically "right-justified" style common to many oral epics. For another, each of them acts as a unit; no matter how long or short it may be in terms of line units, it operates as a kind of traditional adjective modifying the hero.

In addition to formulas for heroes, many other traditional phrases proliferate throughout Mongolian epic. One example is the one-line speech introduction that literally means "he or she is saying loudly" (*hüngginen helen baib-a*). More than simply marking the onset of direct discourse, this formula alerts the audience that a certain kind of speech is about to begin. At a general level, that speech will be forceful and will contain important information; more specifically, it will concern a warning, threat, or prediction about future events. Since it can combine with a virtually infinite number of subjects, this phrase provides the singer and his audience a way to both introduce and frame the speech. Whatever the particular, situational content, this line provides a resonant and familiar traditional context.

Another example, whose literal meaning is similar but whose idiomatic usage is quite different, is the formula "it comes out loudly" (*čüngginen garb-a*). This phrase occurs in only one situation, namely, when Janggar is in serious danger and is calling out for assistance. His voice always enters a person's left ear and exits through the right ear with great loudness. In some cases the voice goes to Honggur's ears directly; in other cases it passes through the ears of Honggur's wife, who then awakes Honggur and tells him of the threat. As a result, Honggur comes to Janggar's aid, driven by the sound embodied in this formula and by the context that it invokes.

Other formulas group around these actions, as when Honggur's wife is set the task of waking a husband whose sleep was brought on by excessive toasting with no fewer than 6,000 comrades. In order to pierce through his deep slumber, she employs a highly traditional strategy: she tugs at his braided hair.[32] In specific terms,

---

[32] A pigtail or *šaluu* is a very old custom among Oirat Mongols. Within the epic, the making of pigtails begins at age five. In every subsequent year the hero receives another *šaluu*, so that an experienced champion like Honggur will have many such braids.

Malmagar hara šaluu-yi ni	The soft, dark black *šaluu*
Hoisi-ban tatan	she pulls backward;
gurba dahigad	three times she repeats it.

As is common with Mongolian traditional phraseology, the last line is a parallel and optional addition; a singer may use it in one performance and not in another. How the action develops from this point depends on the particular story. But the story sequence eventually leads to the preparation for battle, including readying of the horse, and Honggur riding off to help Janggar.

Correspondingly, we should mention that a deep slumber is understood in the epic tradition as a heroic sleep, a state from which it is difficult to rouse someone. Thus, it is only logical that Honggur's wife should have to resort to tugging at his pigtails. Another formula that helps to certify this phenomenon is the widespread description of a hero's sleep in the form of a double simile:

| suhai metü ulaigad | As red as willow |
| sur metü sunugad | As soft as a leather thong |

This example also illustrates the variable length of formulas in heroic epic (two lines as opposed to one) as well as their divergent prevalence ("tugging the pigtail" is localized while the "heroic sleep" simile is known throughout the Mongol world).

In summary, then, the Mongolian epic formula acts like a "large word," a composite unit of utterance based on the metrical foundation of the epic line. It may be as short as a single line or as long as five lines, and one formula may follow another to yield a compound series of yet greater length. The compounding of formulas is always at the discretion of the singer, who suits his performance to the audience, the song, and the moment. Formulaic phrases not seldom bear considerable idiomatic force, such as the introduction to a particular kind of speech or a plea for help spoken so loudly that it is destined to reach even the deeply slumbering Honggur. What the singer controls is therefore not only the structure and morphology of the phraseology (and of course the rule-governed poetic line) but also the traditional implications of his formulaic diction. Those traditional implications will be the subject of our fifth and final question.

2. South Slavic

Like Mongolian epic, South Slavic epic consists of "large words," composite phrases and patterns that are used as wholes by singers.[33] In this tradition the smallest possible formula is an entire colon of either four or six syllables, and many formulas are an entire ten-syllable line in length. The *guslari* maintain a flexible vocabulary of such larger increments, suiting them to the particular story they wish to tell through combination and adjustment. In effect, they are composing in a specialized language used only for the making of epic songs.

Many formulas in South Slavic are in the category of noun-epithet phrases, that is, a hero's name plus some adjective or noun that helps to identify him or her via the traditional

---

[33] See further Foley 1990:278-328.

idiom. Together these elements make up a six-syllable byte—a single *reč*, as the singers refer to such a "word"—that fills the second colon in the line. Here are some examples drawn from the tradition at large that illustrate how the same formula can combine with different partners to produce quite different kinds of whole lines:

a. Rano rani Mustajbeže lički	Mustajbey of the Lika arose early
b. I besjeda Mustajbeže lički:	And Mustajbey of the Lika addressed (them):
c. Posle toga Mustajbeže lički	After him Mustajbey of the Lika
d. "Pobratime Mustajbeže lički"	"Oh blood-brother Mustajbey of the Lika"

In each of these examples the first colon of four syllables joins with the second colon of six syllables to produce a poetic line. But, taken together, the four sample lines demonstrate how wide a variety this process can produce, from simple statements of narrative fact (a) to lines of speech introduction (b) to part of a catalogue of heroes (c) to a direct address by another character (d).

Composite phrases may work in other ways as well. For instance, whole-line patterns with both constant and variable parts are quite common. In this kind of formula a syntactic pattern governs the decasyllabic line, so that the various realizations are in one dimension more similar than are lines that involved noun-epithet phrases such as those cited just above. Here is a series of three syntactic formulas that all follow the same general pattern. They describe a hero's pledge to rescue a kidnapped maiden in the *guslar* Halil Bajgorić's *The Wedding of Mustajbey's Son Bećirbey* (lines 542-44):

*j*O tako mi mača *j*i junaštva,	O by my sword and by my heroism,
*v*O tako mi mojega bjelana,	O by my white steed,
*v*O tako mi četer'es' godina!	O by my fourteen years (of fighting)!

Here a famous Turkish hero named Djerdjelez Alija is swearing to find the girl who was carried off by the enemy and return her to her bridegroom for their planned marriage. He makes his vow formulaically, pledging "Oh by my . . ." in the first colon and filling the second colon with his sword and heroism, his white horse, and his fourteen-year battle record. In a sense this pattern is the reverse of the noun-epithet examples in that it is the first colon that recurs and the second colon that varies. But there is also the additional factor of the whole-line syntactic pattern that unites the series of lines grammatically.

As a final instance of South Slavic formulaic structure, let us cite a phrase that is precisely one whole line in length. It cannot be subdivided beyond that decasyllabic unit without compromising its usefulness as a compositional tool and its idiomatic meaning. We will reproduce a few different versions of this whole-line formula in order to show its adaptability for different narrative situations:

A1. A od tala na noge skočijo	He jumped from the ground to his feet
A2. A od tala na noge skočila	She jumped from the ground to her feet
B1. I skočijo na noge lagane	And he jumped to his light feet
B2. I skočila na noge lagane	And she jumped to her light feet

These four lines collectively illustrate how singers employ two basic forms of the whole-line phrase, each of which can be adjusted for gender difference. That is, depending on the dialect of a particular geographical region or on a singer's personal idiolect style, he may use either "jumped from the ground to one's feet" (A1, A2) or "jumped to one's light feet" (B1, B2). Furthermore, either of these forms can be inflected for a male (A1, B1) or a female (A2, B2). In this way the group of formulas exemplifies a system of diction, a flexible pattern that is highly useful to the *guslar* composing in performance.

Naturally, this small sample does not exhaustively answer the question of "What is a formula in South Slavic epic tradition?" For a more thorough analysis and additional examples we would have to summon many other examples and derive the traditional rules that govern the phraseology.[34] But perhaps it does begin to point the way toward an appreciation of formulaic structure: singers and audiences communicate by means of these "large words," which may be a colon, a line, or multiple lines in length. As in the case of Mongolian epic, we cannot subdivide phrases beyond their identity as units of utterance, both for structural reasons and, as we shall see in answering Question 5, because of the specialized meanings they bear as composite "large words" in traditional context.

3. Ancient Greek

Simply put, Homeric meter and Homeric formulas operate as partners; they are cooperative members of a symbiosis or mutual system. As shown above, the ancient Greek epic line provides a flexible structure for the organization and maintenance of traditional diction, with formulas fitting into the pattern of the meter. To put it another way, the poetic line supports the formation of "large words" that match its metrical pattern, and we will understand the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* best when we realize that because of this match its most fundamental units are traditional.

Formulas may cover from one to four cola in the poetic line. Multiple formulaic lines can occur in sequence, but scholars ascribe these series to a combination of units rather than single multi-line units. Here are a few examples of some recurrent phrases that fill different cola and combinations of cola:

---

[34] This is an important distinction. Although we focus on the product (the actual formulas and lines), the traditional rules that govern the process are much more fundamental. On the role of traditional rules, see further Foley 1990:121-239.

ἀλλ᾽ ἄγε . . .	beginning > A1	But come . . .
τὴν δ᾽ ἠμείβετ᾽ ἔπειτα	beginning > B2	Then [he] answered her
γλαυκῶπις Ἀθήνη	B2 > end	bright-eyed Athena
ποῖόν σε ἔπος φύγεν ἔρκος ὀδόντων	A2 > end	what word escaped your teeth's barrier!
ἧος ὁ ταῦθ᾽ ὥρμαινε κατὰ φρένα καὶ κατὰ θυμόν	whole line	while he pondered these things in his mind and in his heart

Each of these phrases satisfies two major criteria: it occupies a significant segment of the poetic line (one or more of the four cola), and it recurs frequently enough in the Homeric poems to demonstrate its usefulness to a composing poet. The shorter formulas, those of less than an entire line in length, readily combine with other phrases to make up a whole linear unit.

To illustrate the systemic nature of formulas in ancient Greek epic, let us add one further set of examples. All of the following noun-epithet phrases can and do combine with a partner phrase, "And again addressed him/her/them" (τὸν/τὴν/τοὺς/τὰς δ᾽ αὖτε προσέειπε), to make a whole poetic line. This composite line is used hundreds of times in the Homeric poems to introduce an immediately following speech. Here is a sample of names that can occupy the variable portion of the formula:

πολύτλας δῖος Ὀδυσσεύς	B2 > end	much-suffering divine Odysseus
θεὰ γλαυκῶπις Ἀθήνη	B2 > end	goddess bright-eyed Athena
μέγας κορυθαίολος Ἕκτωρ	B2 > end	great flashing-helmeted Hektor
ἄναξ ἀνδρῶν Ἀγαμέμνων	B2 > end	king of men Agamemnon
Γερήνιος ἱππότα Νέστωρ	B2 > end	Gerenian horseman Nestor

This small and partial series is just one instance of how highly functional such formulas are in ancient Greek epic. Using only this single pattern, a poet can introduce speeches by a wide variety of humans and gods. When we consider that there are many such series and combinations, it is possible to get some idea of the systemic dynamics for formulaic structure in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

4. Old English

As indicated above, the Old English poetic line is very flexible: as the partner of traditional diction, it therefore allows for a great deal of variation in formulaic structure. Instead of encapsulated phrases, Anglo-Saxon poetry consists largely of *formulaic systems*, patterns in which one or more constituent words can change from one use to the next. Principally, it is the stressed or alliterating elements that tend to remain stable and constant, and the unstressed and non-alliterating elements that tend to vary. Of course, there are formulas that are exactly repeated every time they are employed by poets, but the majority of the phraseology is much more fluid and systemic.

As one example of how Old English formulaic language works, consider the following series of half-line phrases, all of which mean approximately "in the old days":

in geardagum (*Beowulf*, line 1)	in year-days
on fyrndagum (*Andreas*, line 1)	in olden days
Þe git on ærdagum ("The Husband's Message," line 16)	when you two in earlier days

Notice that not only can the preposition change (*in* to *on* over the first two examples), but the first element of the compound shifts from "year-" to "olden" to "earlier." From the poet's perspective, this flexibility allows him both to use an idiomatic, readymade phrase and yet to vary it to suit the most immediate context. The third example shows further flexibility: since there is no syllabic constraint, the poet of "The Husband's Message" can include more words in the half-line, making it into a more complex unit while still maintaining the pattern. Formulaic structure in Old English is highly adaptable.

Another example of adaptability within limits is the following series of phrases, drawn from a wide variety of Old English epic and non-epic poems:

Þæt wæs god cyning (*Beowulf* 11)	that was an excellent king
ac Þæt wæs god cyning (*Beowulf* 863)	but that was an excellent king
Þæt wæs an cyning (*Beowulf* 1885)	that was a peerless king
wæs ða frod cyning (*Beowulf* 2209)	he was then a wise king
Þæt wæs god cyning (*Beowulf* 2390)	that was an excellent king
Þæt is soð cyning (*Juliana* 224)	that is a true king
Þæt is wis cyning (*Meters* 24.34)	this is a wise king
Þæt is æðele cyning (*Andreas* 1722)	that is a noble king
Þæt wæs grim cyning (*Deor* 23)	that was a savage king
næs Þæt sæne cyning (*Widsith* 67)	that was not a negligent king

The word *cyning* ("king") plus an adjective ("excellent," "peerless," "wise," "true," "noble," "savage," or "negligent") make up the core of the formula, with the adjective bearing the alliteration for the half-line and linking the formula to the other half-line. In addition, the traditional phrase has a syntactic pattern of "that was/is" with small variations. Taken as a whole, this formula provides the poets of these five different poems a ready-made way to celebrate the achievements of an effective king, as well as a way to criticize the shortcomings of a leader. The phrase becomes an idiomatic mode of expression, extremely useful to the *Beowulf* poet, who employs it no fewer than five times to help characterize Scyld Scefing, Hrothgar (twice), Beowulf, and Hygelac. In the other poems the celebrated king is either Guthhere, Eormanric, or the Christian God. Obviously, this formula has wide applicability.

Question # 5: What Is the Register in an Oral Epic Tradition?

Thus far we have concentrated on four interdependent dimensions of oral epic tradition: the nature of a poem, the unit of a typical scene or theme, the identity of a poetic line, and the morphology of the formula. Each of these aspects has taken an idiosyncratic form in each tradition, as would be expected. A Mongolian epic formula is not simply equivalent to a Homeric

formula, for instance, any more than the poem-cycle structure in South Slavic is identical to that same relationship in *Janggar* or typical scenes in Homer and Old English poetry answer precisely the same definition. The lesson has so far been one of balanced, judicious comparison between and among traditions, leavened by a commitment to an appreciation of differences as well as similarities.

We now embark on the fifth and final question, which will prove in many ways the sum of the other parts. By inquiring about the *register* of each oral epic tradition, we are addressing all of these four aspects—the poem, the typical scene or theme, the poetic line, and the formula —as phenomena that embody the rules of composition and reception. We are asking about the overall nature of these varieties of speech, the specialized versions of languages that are meant not to carry on broad-spectrum verbal commerce in the everyday world but exclusively to access the world of epic.

For the anthropologist Dell Hymes, registers are "major speech styles associated with recurrent types of situations,"[35] and we follow that definition of a socially selected sort of language, adding only that both sign and signification must be included in the concept. That is, we will not be content with identifying the repertoire of units and patterns that oral epic poets use to make their poems; we must concentrate equally on what and how these units and patterns mean against the background of the poetic tradition. Our focus is as much on idiom as on structure and morphology.

1. Mongolian

In some ways the register of *Janggar* is very like the unmarked, everyday language of contemporary Mongolia. Children enjoy the stories in part because they find the register interesting and intelligible; what they do not immediately recognize they can quickly learn through repeated experience with tales that resort time and again to recurrent expressive strategies of all kinds. Indeed, *Janggar* singers not uncommonly begin to learn the art of performance before age 10. As noted above, the epic word-order is in many aspects approximately the same as everyday speech, and morphology follows the same rule. But there are also significant differences, discrepancies that mark the diction as epic and alert the audience to the special assumptions of performance.

One of these discrepancies is the presence of archaic words. Two examples of this tendency are terms for measurement: *bal* and *bere*. The former has a definite meaning—it is parallel to "degree" in measuring temperature, as for a fire—but is never used in contemporary situations outside the epic arena. The latter, *bere*, is less exact; it seems to indicate a distance of about two kilometers. For singers, however, the precise measurement suggested by these terms is less important than their almost ritualistic role as an appropriate epic terminology. They are idiomatically a part of the register, indexing temperature and space in an approved, expected manner and linking the measurements involved in any single instance to other measurements that are expressed via the same coding. To speak in terms of *bal* and *bere* is to speak fluently in the epic register.

---

[35] Hymes 1989:440.

Another discrepancy is between the literal meaning of commonly used formulaic language and the special idiomatic meaning that traditional referentiality provides. A listener or reader unfamiliar with the register would be unable to grasp the singer's full meaning, simply because of a lack of fluency in the epic language. It is as if the uninitiated listener or reader lacked a proper dictionary.

One example of the special meanings in this encoded register is the following three-line formula, a frequently occurring structure and a common signal in Arimpil's singing:

ermen čagan hödege	endless white wilderness
ejegüi čagan bögereg	masterless white desert
elesün sir-a tohui-du	yellow sand with corners carved in it

Bound together acoustically by head-rhyme as well as semantically and metaphorically, this unit bears much more than a literal signification. It regularly coincides with one of three narrative situations: a rest break during a long journey, a site for a battle soon to be joined, or a lonely place in which a hero contemplates what his next action should be. Note that there is nothing explicit in the three-line increment that in any way divulges its implicit content; nonetheless any person fluent in the epic register—not simply in the everyday language—will understand the encoded alternatives. Because the poetic tradition links this verbal sign with specific implications, the singer and audience can share a deeper and fuller level of communication. As structurally important and useful as these three lines are, as a formula its most crucial contribution is to the overall sense of the story in its traditional context.

A second example of traditional referentiality in formulaic diction is a four-line segment that Arimpil and other singers employ numerous times in their oral epic performances:

dugtui dotur-a bayihul-a	When a banner is in its container,
dolbing sara-un önggetai	It flashes with moon light;
dugtui-eče-ben garhul-a	When the banner is outside its container,
dolugan naran-u gereltei	It burns with the light of seven suns.

Although the description seems to be focusing only on a banner and its position, with apparently unconnected phenomena stemming from its placement either inside or outside a protecting jacket, in fact what is at issue is much larger and more momentous. Without exception, this cluster of lines identifies Janggar and his great army of 6,012 or 8,000 men (depending on the singer's idiolect), and furthermore indicates that a battle is imminent. Among the assumptions that a fluent listener or reader will make are that the enemy is already present and that a full-scale engagement—which can amount to a massive conflict or an individual duel—will very soon take place. The important connotation is the power and strength of the enemy. More than a well-wrought series of poetic lines (notice the head-rhyme using [d]) or a convenient building block, this carefully structured formula is resonant with implicit implications.

Traditional referentiality also operates at the level of typical scenes, as implications surrounding recurrent actions come to enrich the narrative not simply by their literal meaning but also by what they necessarily connote. A common example of this structural and expressive strategy is what we may call "Healing the wounded hero." When any champion from the "White

Side," that is, from Janggar's group, is wounded, he is treated with a standard series of three items: magical rain, a special kind of water, and a particular medicinal balm. The first of these is called down by Altan Čegeji ("Golden Chest"), Janggar's famous and brilliant aide who boasts many supernatural powers. Next the hero washes his hands and face with the water, whose origin remains unspecified, and sometimes ingests it as well. Finally, the ointment, called *üyeng* and *čagan* ("*üyeng* medicine"[36] and "white medicine"), is applied directly to the wound.

In one respect "Healing the wounded hero" can be understood as a useful structural device. It can be applied to any hero from Janggar's troop, whether he was injured in a battle against the enemy or in a duel with a rival from the White Side. But the idiomatic implications of this unit run deeper and mesh with the most basic conception of heroism in Mongolian epic tradition. Because the three-part treatment never fails—always rescuing the hero from potential death and restoring him to good health no matter what the situation—mere invocation of this typical scene guarantees how the narrative action will proceed. This dependable link between action and result is crucial not just to any one story but to the cycle of *Janggar* tales as a whole since in Mongolian tradition the heroes never die. Indeed, we can say that in this instance the traditional referentiality of the register is instrumental in maintaining the nature of Mongolian heroism, with respect to both the characters who fit that role and the ideal as a whole.

As a final example of the idiomatic implications of the traditional register in Mongolian oral epic, we point toward the singer's customary closure to performance of a canto. As indicated above, cantos begin and end with activities associated with the palace: conviviality and feasting frame whatever action intervenes. As a canto draws to a close, the following series of lines regularly occurs:

jiran honug-un jirgal hijü	Sixty days to share happiness
dalan honug-un danggarai hijü	Seventy days to enjoy a banquet
nayan honug-un nayir hijü	Eighty days to celebrate together

At the structural level, this fixed series of lines signals the ending and completes the figure of ring-composition that surrounds the particular story. The traditional referentiality of that ring is independent of what it contains; its idiomatic meaning is thus much more general than many other expressive strategies. Whatever has happened since the canto opened with the scene at the palace, and whoever has figured in the action, this three-line increment dependably announces closure and completeness.

2. South Slavic

What does a "word" mean in the context of the epic tradition? What implications does a formula, a typical scene, or a story-pattern have inside the special performance arena? What is an

---

[36] The literal meaning of the term *üyeng* cannot be explained by either singers or scholars. This is actually a common feature of traditional oral epic registers, where archaisms survive within formulaic phraseology long after they have dropped out of everyday speech. See further Foley 1999b:23-24, 74-75, 80-83.

epic singer communicating to an audience in addition to literal, dictionary-based meaning? These are some of the questions we must address as we consider the South Slavic epic register.[37]

To begin, consider the final example of a formula discussed above in relation to Question 4. This whole-line phrase takes two main forms, which, for the sake of simplicity, I reproduce here only in the masculine inflection: *A od tala na noge skočijo* ("He jumped from the ground to his feet") and *I skočijo na noge lagane* ("And he jumped to his light feet"). Of course, this line has an obvious literal sense, and singers can and do use it in a wide variety of different songs and situations. From a grammatical and compositional perspective, it is one of the most adaptable and transportable sound-bytes in the *guslar*'s epic language.

But that is only part of its value. As an element in the register, this formula traditionally designates "an honorable response to an unexpected or threatening turn of events that demands the principal's immediate attention."[38] In other words, the physical act of jumping to one's feet is only the external signification; what is far more important—although it remains implied and idiomatic rather than directly stated—is the fact that this formula keys a familiar traditional situation. No matter who the character may be who is undertaking the action, the register certifies that a heroic mission is about to take place in response to something dire or unforeseen. Someone is about to distinguish himself or herself, and to assume a well-known traditional role. By convention, then, the person identified by this formula will soon leave on a life-threatening errand, whether to rescue a maiden, join an army, perform a secret spying mission, or whatever. The poetic tradition does not specify the exact mission or the outcome, but it does identify the character as a particular type and his or her actions as of a particular sort. The "large word" provides a traditional context—an implied verbal map—for what follows.

Noun-epithet formulas such as those examined above also have an idiomatic force within the poetic register. Phrases such as "Mustajbey of the Lika," for example, identify the person (Mustajbey) and his homeland (the Lika, a border territory between Turkish and Christian territory), and in that function they are certainly accurate and informative. But again that literal force is only part of the story. In this and corresponding instances we will find no specific reason for identifying the character via this formula in any of its occurrences; Mustajbey's homeland in the Lika is likely to be entirely irrelevant, no matter what his actions are in any given epic story. What matters is that he is *traditionally* named by employing this or another "large word" from the epic register. When the singer uses such a phrase, he implies the entire characterization of Mustajbey that the audience knows from their experience of his adventures in the epic tradition as a whole, not just the character as he appears in the song that is presently being sung and listened to. The formula opens the door to realizing that this is the Mustajbey who commands the Lika's armies, who fights heroically against Christian enemies, who has a son named Bećirbey, and who despite his noble status can regularly prove traitorous to his own comrades. None of these attributes is literally described by the formula "Mustajbey of the Lika," but all of them are implied in the traditional poetic context it engages.

Nor do formulas always need to name an individual in order to serve the needs of the compositional and expressive register in South Slavic epic. The short phrase *kukavica crna*, or

---

[37] See further Foley 1999b:65-111.

[38] Foley 1999b:108.

"black cuckoo," designates not a dark-colored bird, but rather a woman who has already lost her husband or is in imminent danger of losing him. By giving her this formulaic name, a *guslar* both engages a traditional implication and adds the character he is describing—in whatever situation or song—to the list of other "black cuckoos" in his and the audience's experience of epic poetry. Similarly, by using the adjustable "word" that translates as "But you should have seen . . ." where the blank is filled by the name of the chief character in the next scene, a singer can bridge the narrative gap between events by invoking what he understands—and his audience also recognizes—as an idiomatic phrase for transition. Or a *guslar* might turn to one of hundreds of proverbs, all of them ten-syllable poetic lines, to add traditional context to a specific narrative moment. By virtue of such proverbs, a unique situation or event can be framed in terms of the poetic tradition; the poet effectively connects its individuality to the recurrent, idiomatic realities of the tradition as a whole.

Narrative units, much larger than formulas, also help to make up the epic register, or way of speaking, connecting individual, apparently unique scenes to the larger world of storytelling. By employing typical scenes that carry encoded meanings, *guslari* link immediate descriptions to an implied network of signification. One example of this strategy involves the theme of "Readying the horse" examined above. In addition to simply getting the job done by providing a ready-made, capsule account of cleaning, grooming, and caparisoning the animal, this typical scene also forecasts both the arming of the hero (itself another typical scene) and a trip to be undertaken by the hero or his substitute. This "large word" does not predict the precise nature of the arming, nor does it indicate the exact purpose of the voyage, which may lead to rescue, battle, espionage, or other heroic actions. What it does predict is a general pattern of activity: Readying the Horse, then Arming the Hero, and finally a life-or-death adventure far from the hero's home.

The typical scene of "Shouting in prison," whose basic structure we also examined earlier, offers another example of how the traditional epic register functions. Here the focus is on the lamenting hero who disturbs his captor's son and threatens the survival of the royal lineage until a powerful female figure, usually the captor's wife, intervenes and negotiates the prisoner's release. That set of characters and events produces the literal force of the typical scene, but there is more to its meaning than that. From the moment it begins, customarily with a formula starting with the verb *cmiliti* ("to cry out, scream"), the "Shouting in prison" pattern forecasts a hero who, once released from longtime captivity, will successfully make his way back home to test the faithfulness of his wife. He will face severe challenges en route, and his wife (or fiancée) will have to defend herself against the advances of suitors who are trying to win her in marriage, but at some future point they will meet and some resolution—positive or negative—will take place. There can be no doubt of that outcome; the resolution will happen. All of that embedded story-material is implied when the *guslar* sings the typical scene of "Shouting in prison."

3. Ancient Greek

Similarly, the traditional register of ancient Greek oral epic is far more than a useful compositional device; it is also a finely made instrument for expression. By encoding idiomatic

implications, Homer's "way of speaking" conveys much more than a literal level of meaning.[39] Both individual phrases and typical scenes make implicit reference to the traditional network of ideas, which is of course much larger and deeper than we can discover in a dictionary or lexicon. Understanding the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* depends on working toward a fluency in this specialized language or register.

In the area of formulaic diction, noun-epithet phrases such as "much-suffering divine Odysseus" or "goddess bright-eyed Athena" are considerably more than fillers. They amount to a coded message: by using their recognizable and recurrent form, oral epic poets can gain direct access to the entire complex characterization of the people they name. It is not often immediately important that Odysseus is called "much-suffering" and "divine"; these adjectives do not apply specifically to any one appearance in any single situation any more than a greeting like "Hello" or a wish like "Have a pleasant weekend" applies only to any one moment in one person's life. They are idiomatic phrases, pathways to the larger identity of the figure, methods for characterization on the largest scale. Such coded names access the traditional network and enrich any one episode with global, tradition-wide implications.

Two other formulas mentioned above work in similar ways. The small phrase ἀλλ᾽ ἄγε, which occurs 149 times in the Homeric poems, regularly serves two idiomatic purposes: (1) it divides one section of a speech from another, preparing the listener or reader for a change of focus; and (2) it leads to a command or prayer. Note the impressive economy of the phraseology. Two words (or in our special sense, a single three-syllable "word") carry a complex, multilayered connotation; they organize a speech, mark a transition, and predict the nature of the next action. Likewise, the exclamation "what word escaped your teeth's barrier!" (ποῖόν σε ἔπος φύγεν ἕρκος ὀδόντων) not only occupies a significant subdivision of the poetic line, but it also furnishes a built-in traditional context. When it appears, the fluent audience or reader knows that the speaker —an older or socially superior figure—is scolding another person for something the younger or socially inferior person should have known or done. Although it is far more than the literal meaning of the phrase, that larger frame of reference is the implication of this recurrent frame. Again we can see how the *aoidos* communicates very economically.

Fundamentally the same strategy underlies the use of typical scenes in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Whereas the Feast scene consists of a regular and expectable pattern of elements, it also carries with it a regular and expectable set of implications. Whatever the situation and whoever the host and guest(s) may be, Feast always leads to mediation. In other words, the fluent audience or reader who encounters a Feast scene will expect at least an attempt at solution of a problem as the next narrative increment in the epic. Thus in the first book of the *Odyssey*, for example, the Feast hosted by Telemachos for the disguised Athena leads to the young man's speaking boldly to his mother's suitors and eventually to the trip to Menelaos' and Nestor's homes that prepares him for the reemergence of his father Odysseus later on in the story. According to the same pattern of implication, a Feast precedes Kalypso's release of Odysseus from captivity, Kirke's assistance to Odysseus, and many other corrective episodes.

Finally, the three-part typical scene of Lament—an address to the fallen hero, a narrative of their personal history and the consequences of his death for those left behind, and a final and

---

[39] See further Foley 1999b:115-239.

intimate re-address of the hero—is also more than a structural convenience.[40] Although it does provide a "map" for exploring the mourning speeches given by Andromache, Helen, Hekabe, and Briseis in the later part of the *Iliad*, the typical scene does more than that. In the sixth book of the poem, while Hektor is visiting his wife and son in a brief respite from battle, Andromache asks her husband to remain away from the fighting, to preserve himself for their sake. Of course, Hektor denies her sad request and eventually returns to the battlefield, where he will die by Achilles' hand. But if we listen to the poem's special language, its register, we will notice that Andromache's plea for her husband to stay safe within Troy is expressed in the form of the typical scene of Lament. If we are a good Homeric audience, aware of the way things are said, we will realize that she is already mourning the death of her husband—even though he stands alive before her. Such is the power of the traditional register.

4. Old English

One way to describe the expressive power of the register in Old English oral-derived poetry is to inquire into the idiomatic meaning of the typical scenes and formulas mentioned above in the answers to Questions 3 and 4. What traditional implications do these units bear? In addition to dependable, ready-made structures that are useful for composition, what do the singers accomplish idiomatically by employing these larger "words" in their storytelling?

As already noted, the Exile theme or typical scene occurs very widely across a broad spectrum of different poems and different genres. In every case, it brings with it the idea of a person separated from essential networks of kinship and society, and it implicitly compares that person—the character under immediate examination in the given poem—with other exile figures in the poetic tradition. By aligning this particular character with a host of other exiles in the audience's prior experience, the poets take advantage of the expressive resources not just of one poem but of the entire tradition. This kind of resonance helps to deepen our appreciation of the speaker of the poem entitled *Deor*,[41] for example, an oral singer who has lost his job and position at the royal court. His poem is a lament over the fact that he has been displaced by a new singer, Heorrenda, and he compares the misfortunes of a number of familiar figures from Germanic oral legend in order to convey his sense of loss and estrangement. But when the character Deor says that he "had knowledge of exile" (line 1) and "winter-cold exile" (4), he places himself in a traditional category—a cognitive slot—with which the audience is familiar. Deor is not simply estranged; he is idiomatically a Germanic exile, and that status helps us understand his pain and desolation.

Likewise, the three instances of Sea Voyage in *Beowulf* are structurally very similar but expressively quite different.[42] The two actual trips—from Geatland to Denmark and back again—are straightforward enough: in each case a hero leads his men on a journey. But the third is not even a real voyage; it chronicles the ship-burial of a legendary hero. First, the dead hero and his

---

[40] For a full explanation, see further Foley 1998b:188-98.

[41] See further Foley 1999b:263-70.

[42] See further Foley 1990:336-44.

men go to the ship (element 1), which waits, moored (element 2). They board the ship and place treasure in the form of grave-goods by the mast (element 3). Metaphorically, the ship is said to depart and sail (element 4). But here is where the poet brilliantly manipulates the pattern of the typical scene and the audience's expectation. Instead of the anticipated landing at the other end of the journey, which customarily involves a coast-guard, the *Beowulf* poet indicates that "men don't know, to say truthfully, hall-counselors, heroes under the heavens, who received that burden" (lines 50b-52). The typical scene is serving not only as a structural convenience but as a strategic ploy. The poet is saying that no one can be certain about the afterlife of Scyld Scefing; both his destination and his reception are beyond our knowledge. Here the traditional idiom of the register adds a great deal to the poem.

As for the idiomatic content of formulas as another aspect of the register, both of the examples discussed above are heavy with implication. The phrase "in X-days," where X is a substitutable element bearing the alliteration, is involved in a larger cluster of phraseology that signals a beginning of a narrative and invokes traditional mythology. Combined with the interjection *Hwæt* ("Lo!" or "Listen!"), this formula identifies the onset of a heroic tale and the background of other stories against which the present poem is presented. Many Anglo-Saxon narratives start with a version of this cluster.[43]

The half-line formula "that was an X king," where X again is a substitutable element bearing the alliteration, also has a traditional meaning beyond its literal force.[44] Wherever it appears, this unit certifies the character as a fine leader and protector, a figure whom both his people and succeeding generations will celebrate as an ideal king. This status is automatically conferred by tradition; it is not open to argument nor is there need for independent verification. Thus, for instance, Hrothgar is certified as an excellent king (line 863), even though under his reign Grendel has been able to ravage his people, killing them at will during the night. Hrothgar's excellence derives from his earlier effectiveness, this phrase affirms, and Grendel's ability to overcome his followers is simply a measure of the monster's unprecedented strength and fury. Additionally, this phrase can be turned to a negative purpose, as when the *Deor* poet says the following of the cruel king Eormanric: "that was a *savage* king" (line 23). Using a traditional structure, the poet reverses the idiomatic expectation; while the audience anticipates the positive certification of Eormanric as an effective leader with concern for his people, what they actually hear or read is just the opposite—he is not an excellent but a savage king. By using the implications inherent in the register, the *Deor* poet creates a memorable characterization.

Conclusion

These four epic traditions—Mongolian, South Slavic, ancient Greek, and Old English—represent an enormous variety. They cover an extensive geographical area, from Northern Asia to Western Europe, as well as a time period of at least 3,000 years. As we have attempted to answer

---

[43] See further Foley 1991:214-23.

[44] See further Foley 1991:210-14.

each of the five questions for all four of the epic traditions, we have come to appreciate their diversity even more deeply.

To start, we asked "What is a poem in an epic tradition?" Although this may seem like a simple, straightforward question, we *discovered it depends upon that tradition* for both structure and meaning. Poems follow story-patterns and depend on implied (rather than explicit) reference for the development of characters, events, and situations. Asking "What is *a typical scene* in an epic tradition?" led to similar conclusions. Each of the poetries discussed here uses narrative increments as building blocks, and the patterns change with each performance according to the terms of the individual language and tradition. Typical scenes in Mongolian epic are shared from one canto to another; they take slightly different shapes in the mouths of different singers. Correspondingly, Mongolian typical scenes are in some ways quite unlike the units of ancient Greek, South Slavic, or Old English epic. Each tradition has its own language for composition and reception.

Our third question—"What is a poetic line in an oral epic tradition?"—again addressed the phenomenon of unity and diversity. Some lines are measured by syllables, some by stress or emphasis, some by musical melodies, and others by head-rhyme, tail-rhyme, and assonance. The lesson here is to realize that each oral epic language must be understood on its own terms, and not by imposing irrelevant criteria. The same is true of the *formula*, the initial subject of our fourth question and a unit that exists in cooperation with the poetic line. Since formulaic phraseology is defined by its metrical component, it also will vary from one singer to the next and even more from one epic tradition to another.

These questions and answers led us to our fifth question and our final concern—"What is the register in oral epic poetry?" With this focus we reached beyond the level of structure and utility to the level of idiomatic meaning. Mongolian cantos begin with a "palace scene" and end with feasting; this ring structure acts as a frame for whatever action it encloses. Homer, the ancient Greek legendary singer, uses a feast scene to signify upcoming mediation. The South Slavic *guslari* can refer to a woman as a "black cuckoo" to indicate that she either has been or soon may be widowed. And Old English scops certify a leader's effectiveness and heroism by saying "That was an excellent king!" All of these bytes of narrative or phraseology mean much more than they seem to mean; their traditional, idiomatic sense goes well beyond their literal sense. In their various ways, each of the four epic languages has great resources of implication.

In closing, we hope that this comparative analysis of Mongolian, South Slavic, ancient Greek, and Old English oral epic has proved useful for scholars in various fields. There is an enormous amount still to be done: we need to understand the structure of these performances thoroughly enough to hear and read them on their own terms; we need to assemble dictionaries of "words" (formulas, typical scenes, story-patterns) for each tradition, and we need to take full account of the fact that, no matter how many real similarities we may find among traditions, differences will also remain of fundamental importance. In short, we must strive to become better, more fluent audiences for epic singing.[45]

Chinese Academy of Social Sciences

---

[45] Electronic materials on oral epic are available via the Internet at the web site of the Center for Studies in Oral Tradition, University of Missouri (http://www.oraltradition.org).

References

Bessinger 1978   Jess B. Bessinger, Jr., ed. *A Concordance to the Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records.* Programmed by Philip H. Smith. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Chao Gejin 2000   Chao Gejin. *Kou Chuan Shi Shi Shi Xue: Ran Pi le Jiang Ge'er Cheng Shi Ju Fa Yan Jiu.* (*Oral Poetics: Formulaic Diction of Arimpil's Janggar Singing.*) Nan Ning: Guang Xi People's Publishing House.

Davies 1989   Malcolm Davies. *The Epic Cycle.* Bristol: Bristol Classical Press.

Foley 1985   John Miles Foley. *Oral-Formulaic Theory and Research: An Introduction and Annotated Bibliography.* New York: Garland. (Available online in searchable format with updates at http://www.oraltradition.org.)

Foley 1988   _____. *The Theory of Oral Composition: History and Methodology.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press. Rep. 1992. Trans. by Chao Gejin as *Kou Tou Shi Xue:Pa Li-Luo De Li Lun.* 2000. Beijing: Social Science Documentary Press.

Foley 1990   _____. *Traditional Oral Epic: The Odyssey, Beowulf, and the Serbo-Croatian Return Song.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Foley 1991   _____. *Immanent Art: From Structure to Meaning in Traditional Oral Epic.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Foley 1995   _____. *The Singer of Tales in Performance.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Foley 1999a   _____. "Epic Cycles and Epic Traditions." *In Euphrosyne: Studies in Ancient Epic and its Legacy in Honor of Dimitris N. Maronitis.* Ed. by I. N. Kazazes, Antonios Rengakos, and D. N. Maronitis. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner. pp. 99-108.

Foley 1999b   _____. *Homer's Traditional Art.* University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Foley 2002   _____. *How to Read an Oral Poem.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press. (eCompanion available at http://www.oraltradition.org.)

Foley 2004   _____, ed and trans. *The Wedding of Mustajbey's Son Bećirbey as Performed by Halil Bajgorić.* Folklore Fellows Communications, 283. Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia. (eEdition available at http://oraltradition.org/zbm.)

Foley and Chao Gejin 2003   John Miles Foley and Chao Gejin. 约翰·迈尔斯·弗里、朝戈金合著：《口头诗学五题：四大传统的比较研究,《东方文学研究集刊》（1）主编：王邦维。 长沙：湖南文艺出版社，2003年，第33－97页. ("Challenges in Comparative Oral Epic." Collected Papers on Studies of Oriental Literature, 1. Ed. by Wang Bangwei. Changsha City: Hunan Art Press. pp. 33-97.)

Harris and Reichl 1997   Joseph Harris and Karl Reichl, eds. *Prosimetrum: Crosscultural Perspectives on Narrative in Prose and Verse*. London: D. S. Brewer.

Honko 1998   Lauri Honko, ed. *Textualising the Siri Epic*. Folklore Fellows Communications, 264. Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia.

Honko 2000   _____. *Textualization of Oral Epic*. Berlin: Mouton De Gruyter.

Honko et al. 1998a   Lauri Honko with Chinnappa Gowda, Anneli Honko, and Viveka Rai. *The Siri Epic as Performed by Gopala Naika. Part I*. Folklore Fellows Communications, 265. Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia.

Honko et al. 1998b   _____. *The Siri Epic as Performed by Gopala Naika. Part II*. Folklore Fellows Communications, 266. Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia.

Hymes 1989   Dell Hymes. "Ways of Speaking." In *Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking*. 2nd ed. Ed. by Richard Bauman and Joel Sherzer. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 433-51, 473-74.

JMC   *The Jangar Material Collection in Tod Mongolian*, 3 and 5. Urumqi: Xinjiang People's Publishing House, 1985. Ed. by The Branch of China Federation of Literary and Art Circles in Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region.

Karadžić 1841-62   Vuk Stefanović Karadžić. *Srpske narodne pjesme*. Vienna. Rep. 1975. Belgrade: Nolit.

Krapp and Dobbie 1931-53   George Philip Krapp and E. V. K. Dobbie, eds. *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*. 6 vols. New York: Columbia University Press.

Lord 1960   Albert B. Lord. *The Singer of Tales*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 2nd ed. Stephen Mitchell and Gregory Nagy, eds. 2000.

Monro and Allen 1969   David B. Monro and Thomas W. Allen, eds. *Homeri Opera*. 3rd ed. 4 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Parry 1971   Milman Parry. *The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry*. Ed. by Adam Parry. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Rinchindorji 1999   Rinchindorji. *Jiang Ge'er Lun*. Hohhot: Inner Mongolian University Press.

Sadie 1980   Stanley Sadie, ed. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Washington, D.C.: MacMillan.

SCHS   *Serbo-Croatian Heroic Songs (Srpskohrvatske junačke pjesme)*. 1953-. Coll., ed., and trans. by Milman Parry, Albert B. Lord, and David E. Bynum. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press and Belgrade: Serbian Academy of Sciences.

Taya 1999   D. Taya. "Jangar of Singer Arimpil: Heroic Epics of Oirat-Mongol in Xinjiang." *Journal of Chiba University Eurasian Society*, Special Issue, 1:1-458.

Vladimirtsov 1983-84   Boris Ya Vladimirtsov. "The Oirat-Mongolian Heroic Epic." Trans. by John Krueger. *Mongolian Studies*, 8:5-58.