

## Epics from Oral Tradition

*Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México*

*Lecture 2*

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Plan for the lecture

1. What is an epic from oral tradition?
2. Comparability of “documents”
3. *Microstructure*: phraseology via traditional rules
4. *Macrostructure*: narrative patterns
5. The question of epic cycles
6. The audiences of oral and oral-derived epic
7. Performances (audio and video)

### I. What is an epic from oral tradition?

#### A. Challenge of defining “epic”

- master-genre supporting group identity
  - ++ but often “backward-looking” (Golden Age)
- part of cultural history
  - ++ but famously “inaccurate” (anachronistic amalgam)
- digest of multiple other genres
  - ++ but its own genre as well
- particular stylistic features
  - ++ but highly variable from one tradition to another
- particular performance parameters
  - ++ again highly variable; performers, music, audience, etc.

#### B. Definition by Lauri Honko (1998: 28):

“Epics are great narratives about exemplars, originally performed by specialized singers as superstories which excel in length, power of expression, and significance of content over other narratives and function as a source of identity representations in the traditional community or group receiving the epic.”

- inherent diversity of epic: Foley 2004b, 2005

#### C. Epics *from* oral tradition: two general types

1. Instances from living traditions, experienced as performances
  - for this presentation, primarily South Slavic
  - well-collected; numerous examples; thick context
2. Instances that derive from living traditions, but experienced as texts
  - for this presentation, ancient Greek and medieval English
  - few survivals; uncertain provenience and context

## II. Comparability of “documents” (Foley 1990: 20-51)

### A. First rule of comparative oral epic: not all witnesses are equivalent

- *Histories* are different
- *Media* are different
- *Genres* are different
- *Traditions* are different

#### 1. South Slavic

- Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature  
(<http://www.chs.harvard.edu/mpc/>)
  - ++ “half-ton” of epic: 1500+ epics collected
  - ++ chiefly in Bosnia, from dozens of *guslari*
  - ++ acoustic recordings (singing or reciting)
  - ++ oral-dictated texts
  - ++ photocopied holdings from Belgrade & Zagreb

#### 2. Ancient Greek: Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*

- 1<sup>st</sup> whole *Iliad* = 10<sup>th</sup>-century Codex Marcianus Venetus
  - ++ other mss. (131 at Alexandrian Library)
  - ++ papyrus fragments (later papyri = wild or eccentric)
  - ++ scholia
  - ++ uncertain role of editing (plans vs. technology)
- Epic Cycle
  - ++ fragments & a summary remain
  - ++ other stories associated with Trojan War
- Hesiod
  - ++ *Theogony* and *Works and Days*
  - ++ hexameter poetry, but question of genre
- Homeric Hymns
  - ++ various provenience and authorship
  - ++ hexameter poetry, but question of genre
- Apollonius’ *Argonautica*
  - ++ echoes of Homer, but literary background
- *Iliad* and *Odyssey* = corpus of c. 28,000 lines
  - ++ very limited in comparison to living oral traditions
  - ++ fixed and edited; origins uncertain

#### 3. Anglo-Saxon: the anonymous *Beowulf*

- unique manuscript: Cotton Vitellius A xv
  - ++ not a performance-record
  - ++ at least a copy of a copy (paleography)
- no other epic (except the fragmentary *Waldere*)
  - ++ *Beowulf* = 3182 lines of 20,000 in the poetic corpus
  - ++ very limited sample in comparison to living OTs
  - ++ fixed & edited; origins uncertain
  - ++ describe scribal “recomposition”

- but note “how genre leaks” in A-S oral-derived poetry (Foley 2003)
  - ++ all genres use same meter & phraseology
  - ++ widens the scope of comparison
  - ++ to a lesser extent applicable to ancient Greek

#### B. Three kinds of calibrations necessary

##### 1. *tradition-dependence*

- since all languages differ, so will all epic traditions

##### 2. *genre-dependence*

- epic is one species within a cultural ecosystem of OTs
- comparability to other species must be assessed
  - ++ meter, music, verse form, subject, etc.

##### 3. *medium-dependence*

- living experience or text?
- if living experience, how was it recorded?
- if text, what is its history?
  - ++ Homer: Panathenaia performance, Alexandrian Library, Byzantine scholarship, modern editorial principles
- the traditional referent
  - ++ size and type of referent (28,000 lines or unlimited?)

### III. Microstructure: phraseology via traditional rules

#### A. The smallest “words”: *formulaic phraseology*

1. best understood as a *register*, or “way of speaking”
  - Foley 1995: 49-53, 82-92; Hymes 1989
2. a specialized language for performing & receiving oral epic
  - different from “everyday language”
    - ++ lexicon, grammar, morphology, etc.
  - a “marked language for epic”
  - therefore it must be understood differently (lecture # 4)

#### B. Examples of formulaic phraseology from South Slavic oral epic

[taken from Foley 2004a, online at [www.oraltradition.org/zbm](http://www.oraltradition.org/zbm)]

- \*\* *kukavica* (cuckoo) + *crna* (black) = widow
  - fills second colon (6 syllables) in the 10-syllable line
- \*\* *Rano rani X* (X arose early); applies to any character
  - first colon of 4 syllables + X (second colon, 6 syllables)
- \*\* *Ej! Alija, careva gazija* (Eh! Alija, the tsar’s hero)
  - first colon = name preceded by interjection
  - second colon = fixed formulas – many different heroes

#### C. Examples of formulaic phraseology from ancient Greek oral-derived epic

\*\* . . . (θέα) γλαυκῶπις Ἀθήνη

([goddess] bright-eyed Athena

- second hemistich or third + fourth cola

- can combine with many phrases to make a whole line

\*\* ἤμος δ’ ἠριγένεια φάνη ῥοδοδάκτυλος Ἥως,

(But when morning-born, rosy-fingered dawn appeared,)

- whole-line formula, invariable

\*\* αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ

[δείπνησε/κατέπαυσα/τάρπησαν]. . .

(But when

[he took his meal/I stopped/they delighted] . . .)

-- first hemistich or first two cola

-- can combine with many phrases to make a whole line

D. Examples of formulaic phraseology from Anglo-Saxon oral-derived epic

\*\* *beorn Ecgþeowes* (son of Ecgþeow)

-- patronymic formula for Beowulf

-- regularly combines with *Beowulf maðelode* (Beowulf spoke)

\*\* [*wæter/wann/wod/weox*] *under wolcnum* or [X] *under wolcnum*

([water/dark/he went/he grew up] under the clouds)

-- a half-line or verse; a formulaic system

--N.B. – will be used in the performance of *Beowulf* at the end of this lecture!

E. Artifacts? Or rules for producing instances?

1. “warehouse” model for formulaic phraseology

-- fitting prefabricated metrical pieces together

-- linguistically unrealistic

2. a register is first and foremost a *language*

-- operates via **rule-governed variation**

-- with more rules than everyday language

-- therefore, a more highly coded idiom

3. concept of *traditional rules* (Foley 1990: 121-239)

-- used by oral poet and oral audience alike

-- by reading audiences as best they can manage

-- example: the audience for Basque *bertsolaritza*

4. sample application: South Slavic oral epic

-- rules for the singer, cues (or keys) for the audience

-- rule/cue # 1: *deseterac* (10-syllable line)

-- rule/cue # 2: melody – vocal & instrumental

-- rule/cue # 3: two cola in each line

1	2	3	4		5	6	7	8	9	10
<i>Ra-</i>	<i>no</i>	<i>ra-</i>	<i>ni</i>		<i>Djer-</i>	<i>de-</i>	<i>lez</i>	<i>A-</i>	<i>li-</i>	<i>ja</i>
Early		arose			Djerdelez			Alija		
					<i>ku-</i>	<i>ka-</i>	<i>vi-</i>	<i>ca</i>	<i>cr-</i>	<i>na</i>
					cuckoo				black	
					<i>va-</i>	<i>tru</i>	<i>na-</i>	<i>lo-</i>	<i>ži-</i>	<i>jo</i>
					the fire		kindled			
<i>Ej!</i>	<i>A-</i>	<i>li-</i>	<i>ja,</i>		<i>ca-</i>	<i>re-</i>	<i>va</i>	<i>ga-</i>	<i>zi-</i>	<i>ja</i>
<i>Ej!</i>	Alija,				the tsar's			hero		

-- rule/cue # 4: SBL: shorter before longer (3<sup>rd</sup> line above)

- rule/cue # 5: IAD: initially accented disyllable (2<sup>nd</sup> line above)
  - \*\* # 4 and # 5 help explain the logic of the poetic word-order
- additional primary & secondary rules (Foley 1990: 158-200)
- 5. \*\*If a line follows traditional rules, it is by definition *traditional*
  - whether it recurs in the same or any other performance
  - by the same or any other singer
- 6. Thus the microstructure of oral traditional epic is
  - structured and yet flexible
  - conservative and yet innovative
  - rule-governed and yet open-ended
  - can serve “new” as well as existing topics
    - ++ cf. “partisan songs” & *Smrt u Dallasu*

#### IV. Macrostructure: narrative patterns

- A. Two levels of “larger words” or units of utterance that are
  - both compositional structures
  - and cognitive units
- B. Level of *typical scene*
  - 1. The feast in Homer’s epics (Foley 1999a: 171-87)
    - regularly described as a set of recurrent actions
      - \*\* with situation-specific details mixed in
    - Assembly/Mourning > Purification > Feast > Mediation
      - \*\* scene is part of a larger pattern
    - **structural function** - for the epic poet
    - also a **map for reception** - for the audience
      - \*\* creates a traditional context, an idiomatic “slot”
  - 2. The lament in Homer’s *Iliad* (Foley 1999a: 187-98)
    - A – Address: “You have fallen”
    - B – Narrative: Personal history/consequences
    - A – Readdress: Final intimacy

*Iliad* 24.725-45 (Andromache lamenting her dead husband Hektor):

- A “My husband, you were lost young from life, and have left me a widow in your house, and the boy is only a baby who was born to you and me, the unhappy. I think he will never come of age, for before then head to heel this city will be sacked, for you, its defender, are gone, you who guarded the city, and the grave wives, and the innocent children,
- B [wives] who before long must go away in the hollow ships, and among them I shall also go, and you, my child, follow where I go, and there do much hard work that is unworthy of you, drudgery for a hard master; or else some Achaean will take you by the hand and hurl you from the tower into horrible death, in anger because Hektor once killed his brother, or his father, or his son; there were so many Achaeans whose teeth bit the vast earth, beaten down by the hands of Hektor. Your father was no merciful man in the horror of battle.
- A Therefore your people are grieving for you all through their city, Hektor, and you left for your parents mourning and sorrow

beyond words, but for me passing all others is left the bitterness and the pain, for you did not die in bed, and stretch out your arms to me, nor speak to me some intimate word, which I always could remember, shedding tears through days and nights.”

- continuity with modern lament form (Alexiou 2002)
- 4 other laments follow the same pattern
  - ++ Briseis for Patroklos (19.287-300)
  - ++ Hekabe for Hektor (24.748-59)
  - ++ Helen for Hektor (24.762-75)
  - ++ **also: Andromache for the living Hektor** (6.407-32)
    - \*\* during his brief return from the battlefield
    - \*\* attempting to persuade him to leave the fighting
    - \*\* *kleos* (renown) vs. *oikos* (home)

#### C. Level of *story-pattern* (Foley 1999a: 116-67)

Absence

Devastation

Return

Vengeance

Wedding

- Tell story of South Slavic “Return Song”
- = story of the *Odyssey*
- = Indo-European story

Crucial point:

the woman, not the male hero, determines the action (Foley 2001)

Non-chronological order of the story

Penelope’s indeterminacy (she *must* remain evasive and non-committed)

Ending or *telos*

#### V. The question of epic cycles

##### A. In well-collected epic traditions, such as

- Central Asian (Gesar, Janggar epics): cantos
  - ++ loosely organized episodes around a central hero
  - ++ performed as separate epics
- West African
  - ++ Mr. Rureke & *Mwindo epic*
  - ++ Why perform the “whole thing”?
- South Slavic
  - ++ tales of various heroes / various events
  - ++ sometimes mutually contradictory stories
  - ++ never “well integrated”

##### B. In ancient epic traditions, which are poorly preserved:

- ancient Greek and the so-called “Epic Cycle”
- what we have:
  - ++ the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as whole poems
  - ++ fragments of other “lost epics” (quotations)
  - ++ much later summary by Proclus of the Cycle poems

- on this basis scholars have posited:
  - ++ a complete cycle of stories about the Trojan War
  - ++ an ordered arrangement, with no gaps
  - ++ textual influence from “lost,” hypothetical epics on the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*

- C. But oral epics seem to exist as traditional “constellations” or “universes”
  - not as ordered parts, neatly separated and making up a whole
  - the anthology model stems from the *ideology of literacy and the book*
    - ++ it should not be imposed on oral epic (Foley 1999b)
    - ++ more on these points in lecture # 5

## VI. The audiences of oral and oral-derived epic

### A. Original audience of oral epic

- fluent in the register used by the singer
- understands the idiomatic meaning of “words”
  - ++ formulaic phraseology (“black cuckoo” = widow, etc.)
  - ++ typical scenes (lament: structure & expectations, etc.)
  - ++ story-pattern (general map for the entire story)

### B. “Outside” audience

- either readers of transcribed oral epic
- or readers of oral-derived epic
- “outside audiences” have two choices:
  1. we can understand these works *on textual terms*
    - ++ applying our usual reading strategies
    - ++ ignoring the special language of oral epic
  2. we can try to understand these works *on oral traditional terms* (on their own terms)
    - ++ restoring as much of the traditional idiomatic meaning as possible
    - ++ aiming at some degree of fluency in the register
    - ++ reading the “words,” not just the words (lecture # 1)
  3. If we choose the first option,
    - ++ we will in some ways misread oral epics
  4. If we choose the second option,
    - ++ we will avoid at least some potential misreadings
  5. As “outsiders,” we will never approach full fluency;
    - ++ but we can do much better than we have done

## VII. Two Epic Performances

### A. The *guslar* performing a *junačka pjesma* (heroic song)

- the singer: Halil Bajgorić
- *Ženidba Bećirbega Mustajbegova* (*The Wedding of Mustajbey’s Son Bećirbey*)
- FFC 283 (Foley 2004a)
- online at [www.oraltradition.org/zbm](http://www.oraltradition.org/zbm) (more details in lecture # 5)

\*wOj!\* Rano rani Djerdelez Alija,  
vEj! Alija, careva gazija,

Oj! Djerdelez Alija arose early,  
Ej! Alija, the tsar's hero,

Na Visoko više Sarajeva,		Near Visoko above Sarajevo,
Prije zore vi bijela dana --		Before dawn and the white day --
Još do zore dva puna savata,	5	Even two full hours before dawn,
Dok se svane vi sunce vograne		When day breaks and the sun rises
hI danica da pomoli lice.		And the morning star shows its face.
Kad je momak dobro vuranijo,		When the young man got himself up,
vU vodžaku vatru naložijo		He kindled a fire in the hearth
vA vuz vatru dževzu pristavijo;	10	And on the fire he put his coffeepot;
Dok je momak kavu zgotovijo,		After Alija brewed the coffee,
*hI* jednu, dvije sebi natočijo --		One, then two cups he poured himself --
*hI* jednu, dvije, tu ćejifa nije,		One, then two, he felt no spark,
Tri, četiri, ćejif ugrabijo,		Three, then four, the spark seized him,
Sedam, osam, dok mu dosta bila.	15	Seven, then eight, until he had enough.

**\*\*Play a sample from the eEdition\*\***

B. The *scop* performs *Beowulf*

-- the singer: Benjamin Bagby at Helsingborg, Sweden

-- available on DVD (<http://www.bagbybeowulf.com/>)

Hwæt, we Gar-Dena in geardagum		Lo! We of the Spear-Danes in days of yore
þeodcyninga þrym gefruginon,		heard of the chieftain-kings' glory,
hu þa æþelingas ellen fremedon!		how these princes performed valor.
Oft Scyld Scefing sceapena þreatum,		Often Scyld Scefing from troops of injurers,
monegum mægþum, meodosetla ofteah,	5	from many tribes, withheld the mead-benches,
egsode eorlas. syððan ærest wearð		terrified the nobles, after he was first
feascraft funden; he þæs frofre gebad,		discovered destitute; he experienced comfort for that,
<u>wex under wolnum</u> * weorðmyndum þah,		<u>grew up under the clouds</u> , prospered with glories,
oþ ðæt him æghwylc ðara ymsittendra		until each of the neighboring tribes
ofer hronrade hyran scolde,	10	over the whale-road had to obey him,
gomban geldan; þæt wæs god cyning!		pay him tribute. That was a brave king!
Ðæm eafera wæs æfter cenned		To him an heir was afterwards born
geong in geardum, þone God sende		young in the dwellings, whom God sent
folce to frofre; fyrendearfe ongeat,		as a comfort to the people; He knew the distress
þe hie ær drugon aldorlease	15	that they earlier suffered, lordless,
lange hwile; him þæs Liffrea,		for a long while; because of this the Lord of life,
wuldres Wealdend woruldare forgeaf,		the Ruler of glory gave him worldly honors,
Beowulf wæs breme -- blæd wide sprang --		Beowulf was famous -- his renown spread widely --
Scyldes eafera Scedelandum in.		Scyld's heir in the Danish realm.
Swa sceal geong guma gode gewyrcean,	20	So must a young man work brave deeds,
fromum feohgiftum on fæder bearme,		with bold gifts in his father's bosom,
þæt hine on ylde eft gewunigen		so that in his old age they may in turn stand by him,
wilgesipas, þonne wig cume,		willing companions, when war may come,
leode gelæsten; lofdædum sceal		the people may serve him; by praiseworthy deeds
in mægþa gehwære man geþeon.	25	must a man prosper in each tribe.

\*an Old English formula, [X] *under wolcnum*, as noted in IIID above



## Resources

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