The Production of Finnish Epic Poetry—
Fixed Wholes or Creative Compositions?

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One meets again and again in studies of epic singing among various peoples accounts of singers who are able to repeat a long narrative poem after only a single hearing, reworking or improving the original version in their own renditions, or rapidly producing a new poem on a given theme.[1] The repetition of a song on the basis of only a single hearing was also apparently not unheard of in the Finnish-Karelian song tradition. There were a number of singers who were able to repeat any song after having heard it only once, among others, Iivana Shemeikka, who—as has been reported—"after hearing a song but once knew it for good" (Virtanen 1968:42). Although the skill of the gifted singer made it possible to improvise on the basis of traditional forms and to repeat a song after hearing it only once, as a general collective expression it was obviously a

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[1] Arash Bormanishov (1982:163) writes thus about Kalmyk epic singers: "It is a known fact that among the Kalmyks there were some who memorized separate epic songs right on the spot, after having listened only once to a bardic performance." Albert Lord (1960:78-79) mentions as an example of the learning capabilities of the Yugoslav master singer Avdo Međedovic a situation in which another singer—Mumin Vlahovljak— performed a song that Avdo had never heard before. After Mumin had finished, Avdo praised the song, but stated that he could perform it better. Although Mumin's version was already thousands of lines in length, Avdo's interpretation was even longer. Avdo's poem was more complete and richer than that which Mumin had presented, and made use of standard elements characteristic of Avdo's repertoire in its construction. Similar accounts have been given of Russian *bylina* singers. The *bylina* collector P. I. Ončukov recorded a performance of the *bylina* "Luka and the Dragon" by a singer named Durkin. Another singer, named Pozdeev, who was present at Durkin's performance but who had never heard the song before, was later able to reproduce the *bylina* himself after only the single hearing. A. F. Gil'ferding met an illiterate singer M. Menšikova who performed the Serbian epic song "Iova and Mara," having heard it read only once from a book, and in Russian translation (Sokolov 1924:42-46; cf. Arant 1967:11).

given that the widespread or well-known epic poems must be repeated in a traditional, standard form (Virtanen 1968:57-58). This kind of concept might dominate, but the study of collected epic poetry would nonetheless reveal signs of considerable variation.[2]

Evidence from the Finnish singers indicates that songs might differ from each other in terms of their variability. Senni Timonen notes Larin Paraske's explanations to the collector A. Neovius.[3] Paraske provided Neovius with some interesting and contradictory ideas on the relations of faithfulness to tradition and free license. On the one hand, Paraske maintained: "I have only heard from others, I sing what others have sung before, things of my own I do not sing." On the other hand, she explained: "This isn't the Gospel that it need be so exact; one can put one's own words in too" (Timonen 1982:165). As a singer trained in the song tradition, Paraske could transmit what were in her opinion faithful renditions of songs she had learned. On the other hand, she recognized that variation at some level was both natural and acceptable.

The academician Matti Kuusi has made similar observations. He demonstrated in his repertoire analysis of the Ingrian (Finnic) singer Maria Luukka that she had been in her youth an innovative singer who was able to synthesize isolated elements into new wholes—on the other hand, as an older singer devoted to the tradition and to preserving the poems in relatively stable form, she forgot some old elements and learned some new, but attempted to preserve her core repertoire unchanged through the decades. Her repertoire also showed the same kinds of variation in the

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[2] One may find abundant examples of these concepts in studies of epic songs among various peoples. The Russian *bylina* singer Ivan Trofimovič Rjabinin became indignant when at one point he was asked to leave out a few seemingly unsuitable words from one of his songs: "How can I not sing them? Not a single word can be left out! As the folk sang, so must we sing; it is not our creation nor are we its end" (Ljackij 1895:14-15). This idea is described as well in the proverb "Leave no word unsung," which is found not only in Russian and Byelo-Russian traditions, but also in the Polish, Lithuanian, and Vepsian-Karelian material (Grigas 1987:168; Bogatyrev 1967:189; Hakamies 1986:98). The Russian singer F. A. Konaškov explained firmly that he sang his *byliny* in the form in which he learned them. When repeated recordings revealed clear variations, and these were brought to his attention, the singer responded by asking: "Did I really forget that then?" The collector A. M. Linevskij found it best not to let the singer know about these alterations, since awareness of them caused the singer to become bogged down in the subsequent recordings (Linevskij 1948:34; cf. Bogatyrev 1967: n. 14).

[3] Timonen 1982: 166-67. Paraske is famous as one of the most prolific and most gifted singers in the Finnic lyric and lyric-epic tradition.

extent of change that given poems underwent. Certain poems can be identified as relatively fixed or relatively prone to improvisation within the corpus of her repertoire (Kuusi 1983:181-84). This kind of shaping process within a poetic repertoire may underlie the preservation in relatively fixed form of poems in the repertoire of numerous other singers in the Kalevala tradition.

The above remarks may lead one to rather conflicting conclusions: singers could repeat songs after a single hearing, and compose new songs on a given subject. On the one hand, they claimed to retain their songs in the form they learned them, leaving nothing out and adding nothing new; on the other hand, they admitted as well that variation was permissible. Prominent singers could repeat very traditional standard narratives of the collective heritage, recast these as newer, somewhat more variable wholes, or even create new and original productions.

Paul Kiparsky has suggested that Finnish epic singers had at their disposal very little unattached thematic material they could incorporate freely at any suitable point in the narrative. He noted a lack of standard episodes for describing a battle, the forging of weapons, preparing for battle, and so on. Kiparsky further adds that every event is unique in poetry and most epic verses belong to a particular song.[4] Differing opinions have also been put forward.[5] It is a fact that in Finnish epic poetry there exist certain stereotypical poetic images than can be used in the most varied of contexts; the field covered by such images can be extended to comprise all Kalevala poetry.[6]

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[4] Kiparsky 1976:95-96. Cf. also Oinas 1990:304.

[5] Jouko Hautala wrote in 1945: "The composer of a poem must first have a subject, secondly a tool in the form of a poetic meter, here conceived of in such broad terms that it includes all the traditional artistic means belonging to a particular type of poem. — It is only natural that the composer of a folk poem unsuspectingly and without more ado selects from his store of lines and complete verses any material that seems suited to his poem. — Carried to extremes, this procedure means that existing verses can be used to construct entirely new logical entities, poems, using existing episodes like building blocks. Assisting this is the meter, which is the same for all poems." (15-16; see also Hautala 1947:40 and Lehtipuro 1974:16-18). Hautala was presumably not familiar with the studies of Parry; at least no reference is made to them.

[6] Cf., e.g., Hautala 1945: 16.

Formula Families

There are systems of formulae in which the concept of sameness can be extended beyond mere similarity of meter and vocabulary. There are in Kalevala poetry some distinct categories of formulae, and we often encounter cases that call to mind the "families" formed on the basis of the preverbal gestalt.[7]

The line *taoit enne, taoit egle* ("you forged formerly, you forged in bygone days") used as a formula in West Ingrian poetry belongs to poems telling either of the origin of the world or of the birth of the *kantele*. In both cases it belongs to a similar contentual episode in which a smith is requested to make a magic tool or musical instrument (the kantele). As we can see, the formula relies on repetition of the verb in exactly the same form at the beginning of parallel half-lines. The second components of the half-lines, *enne / egle* (formerly / in bygone days), are furthermore analogically parallel adverbs indicating past time.

There are dozens of formulae and formula-like expressions using a similar construction. The identical repetition of the verb at the beginning of the parallel halves of a four-word line includes a large number of lines:

Takoi niitä, takoi näitä	He forged this, he forged that
Antoi niitä, antoi näitä	He gave this, he gave that
Tappo nuoret, tappo vanhat	Killed the young, killed the old
Käytii piispat, käytii papit	Came the bishops, came the priests
Etsin Suomet, etsin saaret	I sought Finland, I sought the islands
Kylpi Untoi, kylpi Ventoi	Unto bathed, Vento bathed
Niitti klaisat, niitti ruo'ot	Cut the reeds, cut the rushes

Such formulae are used in countless poems. The line *takoi niitä, takoi näitä* ("forged this, forged that"), for example, is to be found in the poems about the golden bride, courting the maidens on the island and courting the sun and the moon. They belong to different types of contexts in which their task is, by using parallel comparison, to indicate a large quantity of some property or phenomenon by means of synonyms (reeds / rushes), analogy (Finland / island), or antithesis (the young / the old).

We could continue the list. The same basic construction (Verb + X, Verb + X) also occurs so that the instead of a precise repetition of the verb form, another verb close in meaning and conforming to the rules of Kalevala parallelism is used:

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[7] See the theory advanced by Michael Nagler (1974:espec. 5-12).

| Souva laivoi, jouva laivoi | Row boat, hurry boat |
| Puri puuta, söi kivee | Bit wood, ate stone |

The creation of poems is not tied to parts of speech, nor even to syntactic constructions. Thus the same principle as that outlined above is used to undergird a broad formula family without these formulae being identical linguistically. The guiding principle is that a line has four words and is divided into two halves. Some parallel half-lines or a parallel word is used. The other components in the half-lines are in most cases analogical or antithetical concepts; sometimes there is identical repetition.

Pronoun + noun / pronoun + noun

| Kelle tyttö, kelle poika | To whom a girl, to whom a boy |
| Kello etso, kulle etso | To whom a search, to which (one) a search |

Pronoun + verb / pronoun + verb

| Mitä lauloin, kuta lauloin | What I sang, which one I sang |
| Sillä syötti, sillä juotti | This to eat, this to drink |

Adverb + noun / adverb + noun

| Mihi neito, kuhu neito | Where the maid, whither the maid |
| Siellä madot, siellä toukat | There are worms, there the grubs |

This is just one example of the countless formula families we may find. We may, like Hautala, claim that formulae can very well be said to apply to all Kalevala poetry. But can we define the formula for the Kalevala epic? We may, in the manner of Joseph Russo, propose that most definitions of formula are right in their own way and reflect some fact about the phenomenon under study, some level of regularity (1976:35). It is indeed possible to define the concept of formula by resorting to various criteria and emphasizing various factors—from the phonetic and rhythmic to the semantic level.

Standard Sequences

Albert Lord, drawing on relatively slight material (three individual variants on different motifs sung by three singers), discovered repeated sequences that remain the same in different versions of the same theme. On the basis of these examples he concluded that keeping to a fixed text does not produce such versions; what it does produce are repeated sequences

adapted to the context of the poem being sung (Lord 1987a:249-51; 1987b:307-11).

A good example of a standard sequence attached to many poetic motifs is the description of how Väinämöinen carved himself a boat. This begins the poems about the boat journey, seeking timber to make a boat, the wooing contest, the visit to Vipunen, the visit to the Underworld, and also the Sampo episode, which begins with an episode taken from the visit-to-Vipunen motif. This opening theme usually describes how Väinämöinen makes a boat by singing (incanting), but notes that there were a few words missing.[8]

Oli vanha Väinämöinen.	Once there was old Väinämöinen
tietäjä ijän ikuine	sage eternal, very ancient
teki tiijolla venettä,	made a boat out of wisdom
laittoi purtta laulamalla;	shaped a sail by singing
uupui kolmea sanoa,	three words were missing
peähän purren peästäksensä	in getting to the end of the board
parraspuita pannessaha.	in making the gunnel.

Väinämöinen sets off to find the words, either from the long-dead Antero Vipunen, or from the Underworld, or sometimes from some other difficult place, such as a pike's head, a salmon's mouth, a swan's feathers, the top of a deer's head, and so on. The "seer's skills" theme is thus a fixed sequence typically used to begin a poem; it sets the scene and motivates the events proper.

An example of how a theme is adapted to different contexts is the poem about Väinämöinen's knee-wound, in which Väinämöinen strikes his knee with an axe as he carves his boat and sets off to find someone to staunch the bleeding. This time he was making a boat not by incanting but by carving it with a concrete axe.[9]

Itse vanha Väinämöini	The old Väinämöinen
vesti vuorella venehtä,	carved a boat on the mountain
loati purtta kallivolla,	made a sail on the rock
ei kirves kivehen koske,	the axe did not strike the boulder
eikä karska kallivohe;	did not crunch on the rock
kirves liuskahti lihahe,	the axe slipped into his flesh
Väinämöisen varpahase	onto Väinämöinen's toe

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[8] SKVR I1, 507, no. 393, lines 1-7 and SKVR I1, 62, no. 42; also 62, lines 1-7.

[9] SKVR I1, 411, no. 306, lines 1-8.

| polvehe pojan pätöisen | onto the poor boy's knee |

In this case the alliteration using *t* in the second line is replaced by *v*; *teki tiijolla venettä* / *vesti vuorella venettä*; the word *laulamalla* ("by singing") is replaced by *kalliolla* ("on the rock"). The frame of the opening is, however, basically the same: Väinämöinen carving a boat. It is, furthermore, quite common for lines belonging in principle to different poetic contexts to be encountered in a single motif. Thus Väinämöinen's wound begins in one variant as follows[10]—

Tuopa vanha Väinämöini,	That old Väinämöinen
vesti vuorella venehtä,	carved a boat on the mountain
kallivolla kalkutteli,	beat it on the rock
luati purtta laulamalla	made a sail by singing

—and the visit to the Underworld, which is usually accompanied by making a boat by incanting, begins in a few variants in the manner familiar from the poem describing the wound:[11]

Vaka vanha Väinämöinen	Sturdy old Väinämöinen
ulkoinen umannon sulho	distant bridegroom from Umanto
veisti vuorella venettä	carved a boat on the mountain
kalliolla kalkutteli	beat it on the rock

We could, of course, speculate which motif this opening suits most naturally, but the poetic material itself proves that such a question is futile. We cannot search the nebulous history of a poem for an "original," so it is most natural to explain that as singers developed their own versions of themes, they made use of the line sequences commonly encountered in the tradition; some of them are suitable for setting the scene for several plot constructions or describing different events, others for relatively few situations.

Competent singers characaterize or recall first of all the poem's overall structure (the content and order of broad narrative wholes). These broad entities are in turn constituted from small, recurrent optional units, which vary in number with the tradition: precise descriptions of actions/ events, frames/individuals, and characterizations. A third group is made up of recurrent units at the level of the line or below. The proficient

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[10] SKVR I1, 406, no. 304, lines 1-4.

[11] SKVR I1, 457, no. 353, lines 1-4.

use of these units is the final and finest mark of the singer's art, the mastery of which makes it possible to perform long poems without interruption. Gifted singers are able to use these units at once to vary, compose, and learn long narrative structures.[12]

As a rough generalization it could be said that in some poetic cultures the performers generally produce relatively fixed entities (small-scale epic), while in others the singers compose poems by drawing on traditional devices in relatively free combinations (large-scale epic). Finnish-Karelian and Russian narrative poetry would belong normally to the former category, while the epic poetry of the Southern Slavs, especially the Bosnian and Hercegovinian Moslem singers, as well as numerous Mongolian and Turkic

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[12] In Mongolian and Yugoslav traditions, the training of the performer took place over a long and protracted period, involving numerous developmental stages. The Russian Altaist B. J. Vladimircov (1923:29-31; cf. Kondrat'ev 1970:9-11) describes the learning process of epic songs in the Northwestern Mongolian tradition as follows: "In order to be able to retain the pattern, the singer becomes experienced in dividing the poem into its fundamental parts: the introduction, central plot, and interpolated episodes, and learns to differentiate different descriptive sequences from each other, separating for instance passages devoted to describing the beauty of some region, steed, or princess from the passages devoted to the principal plot, the hero's exploits. Having internalized this material, and having clarified in his mind the chain of events in the poem, the young apprentice begins to learn recurrent sequences of lines (literally "commonplaces," *loci communes*; author's note) and methods of embellishment, descriptive expressions. The would-be performer of Oirat heroic epics must learn that certain portions of the poem recur in a regular fashion, and that they may appear in other poems as well; the apprentice must also not fail to note, however, that a good, experienced singer knows how to add elements to these repeated portions, varying and enlivening them by doing so. The singer-in-training memorizes various recurrent sequences, for example opening passages in which the hero's homeland is praised, a steed is described, or man-to-man combat between heroes is recounted. Then he learns the mass of poetic expressions, figures of speech, and epithets as well, and seeks to fit them into the plot he knows."

Vladimircov goes on to say that a singer may know any number of poems, each of several thousand lines, may drop a given poem out of his repertoire, and may easily learn some other song. The true singer has a large store of narrative lines at his disposal, which he may use to his advantage as he sees fit at a moment of inspiration, and may lengthen or abbreviate episodes at will. An adept singer may perform a given poem in the space of a night, or he may stretch it out over three or four nights, preserving the fundamental parts of the narrative structure intact. This description of Oirat singers resembles in its essentials A. B. Lord's account of the Yugoslav epic "oral-formulaic" learning process (1960:ch. 2).

traditions, belong mostly to the latter.[13] This division is, however, not categorical.

Composition would appear to be represented in different ways in different poetic cultures and areas. What, then, is the reason why some specific methods of song composition are more common than others? The differences between the poetic devices used or the division into "small-scale" and "large-scale" epic do not provide a full explanation. One of the focal points is the concept of tradition-dependence, as presented by J. M. Foley, according to which allowance must be made for the idiosyncratic features of an oral tradition in devising an analytical model. Such features include the distinctive characteristics of the vernacular: meter and prosody in general, but also narrative practices, mythical and historical content—in fact anything that is peculiar to a tradition and fundamentally affects its definition.[14]

There are also differences in the way singers compose their songs. It is possible to distinguish in the Finnish tradition conservative singers, who repeat their poems as more or less fixed entities; innovative singers, with a tendency towards slightly freer and more personal composition; and compilers, who weave clearly distinct entities out of the relatively stable elements in their areas. Naturally, there are also some who fall in between these categories—from singers producing and repeating almost fixed versions to "mixers" who combine at random material taken from different

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[13] V. M. Gacak uses the term small-scale epic for a type of narrative poetry of which "a tendency to compose" is not, with isolated exceptions, characteristic. He places in this category, e.g., the epic poetry of the Slav peoples, Finnish-Karelian epic poems, the songs of the Edda, and so forth. The second concept, large-scale (eastern) epics, applies to epic poetry marked by the wide use of situational improvisation; in this category he places the traditional poetry of the eastern peoples (judging from his sources he means Altaic) and the epics of Bosnian Moslems (1983:190, 195, note 4. Nekljudov (1984:83) provides an interesting picture of the Mongolian poetry tradition—the number of lines in the versions produced may range from more than 20,000 among western Buryats to less than a thousand in the epic poems of the Khalkhas. Buryat epic poetry has also more archaic, mythical features than that of the Khalkhas and Oirats.

[14] Foley 1985:68-70. Foley mentions three concepts that should be borne in mind when comparing poetic traditions. In addition to tradition-dependence he distinguishes *genre-dependence*, meaning that to be comparable different traditions must also be comparable in the genre-analytical sense. His third concept is *text-dependence*, meaning examination of the nature of the document or other source for analysis: whether it is definitely oral or based on oral tradition, recorded at a sung or a dictated performance, tape-recorded, or handwritten, and so on.

contexts.

Among the best known singers in the latter category were Sohvonja Simanainen and Elessei Valjokainen. Versions sung by them, differing from the normal local versions yet nevertheless employing the devices of Kalevala poetry, are to be found, in accordance with the respect for "original" variants at the turn of the century, under "miscellaneous formations" in the Ancient Poems of the Finnish People—or they are contemptuously called "fabrications." Compilers are clearly in the minority in the Finnish material. There may, however, have been more free composers than we know of (or at least singers capable of free composition), for collectors valued singers who kept to the fixed, "correct" versions (cf. Kiparsky 1976:97-98).

Formulas and Cognition

The most well-known theory on the epic singers technique of production is the one offered by the oral-formulaic school. In oral-formulaic theory the problem of epic poetry processing has been solved by creating a sort of grammar in terms of apt definitions of formulas, themes, story patterns, preverbal Gestalts, and so forth. The problem is that all different types and levels of recurrent units have been treated in a unified manner (cf. Miller 1987:360). For instance, the definition of formula by Parry and Lord—"a group of words regularly employed in the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea"—contains only a few parameters: metrical conditions, lexical regularity, and essential ideas. The definition may act as a condition for selection, in other words for seeking items for analysis thought to be relevant to the study. What is found depends on the sorts of questions to which the material is subjected, the level of analysis, and the scientific framework. What we may need is a description of the whole system of reproduction that actually forms the basis of the process of creating epic poems.

Such reproduction requires parallel processing on various levels simultaneously: activating phonological, morphosyntactic, lexical, metrical storage, and primary poetic devices. The memory of a singer is not a network of stable elements, but a multidimensional grid.[15] The concept of formulaicity must be seen as a result of "covariation of form and meaning"

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[15] Cf., e.g., Karlsson 1988:135; Jackendoff 1985:8-10; Miller 1987:111; Vīķis-Freibergs 1989:70.

(Hymes 1981:7; Briggs 1988:10), or as representations of both surface structure and meaning structure on various levels.

The process described above, as well as repetition of songs on the basis of a single hearing, gives us evidence that oral singers learn—and reproduce—songs using story schemas and macrostructural, propositional contents. These overall structures provide a basis for easy learning and recall.[16] As we know, among the features of epic poems (and indeed of folklore in general) is a tendency to preserve the linguistic and poetic conventions that have become familiar and primary in the community. On the level of microstructure the singer has at his disposal (apart from linguistic forms) the traditional means of epic poetry: metrical constraints, parallelism, alliteration, and other preferences of collective tradition.

During the verbalization (composition) process the singer can elaborate some details according to his own preferences and purposes. But in order to produce an entire epic song, he has to activate a number of systems simultaneously. He therefore employs material formulaically organized. This means (using the terms of cognitive science) that the memory of the singer works on multilevel representations containing features of surface and meaning structure. Formulas, ideas, and images cohere; certain scenes and contents tend to include certain details, clusters of forms, and so on.[17] Oral poetry is innovative and traditional at the same time.

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[16] Cf., e.g., Siikala 1990:18-22; Chafe 1977:235-45; Gülich/Quasthoff 1985:178-79; van Dijk 1980:49; van Dijk/Kintsch 1983:190.

[17] Cf. Fry 1981:285 and Fillmore 1977:92-93, 126-28.

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