

## REVIEW ARTICLE

## Oral Epic Poetry in the Central Himalayas (Garhwal and Kumaon)

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Even though non-European literature is no longer dismissed as folklore, oral poetry still is widely treated as a special form of literature, as terms like "oral text" or "folk literature" illustrate. Oral poetry is generally associated with such expressions as "anonymous," "traditional," "simple," and "authentic"; many regard it as a precursor to true literature, and thus a survival of something original. This promotes a sort of alienation from this poetic form, by treating it as somehow inferior to the printed word. It is then the task of scholars to mitigate the alienation thus created. I want here to introduce briefly a few approaches through which oral forms of poetry, in particular oral epics from the central Himalayas (Kumaon and Garhwal), are made "intelligible" to outsiders.

Oral poetry in the central Himalayas is still a dominant art form, although its existence is now threatened by the new media and by radical social change. The majority of books about oral poetry are modeled either on British folklore studies (the paradigm here is *Himalayan Folklore*, by Oakley and Gairola) or, in the case of Indian authors, on the systematics and terminology of the Sanskrit *Kāvya Śāstras*. Thus, both approaches generally do not use indigenous terminology and classification. The first oral epic I want to introduce, *Mālūshāhī Rājulā*, is listed by Oakley and Gairola under the heading "Legends of Heroes," whereas it is classified by the Indian folklorist Cātaka as a *praṇay gāthā* 'love song' (1973: 258),<sup>1</sup> and by Meissner as a "ballad" (see below).

This epic is in fact the only one from the central Himalayas<sup>2</sup> which has been "completely" transcribed and translated, by Meissner (1985). The

author of this very laudable project comments on the present situation thus (p. xv): "we now possess learned publications about the oral literature, but no editions of the texts themselves. And soon there will be no more singers alive, so that all that is left of these wonderful songs will be meagre summaries standing in library shelves."<sup>3</sup> Meissner provides a survey of such "meagre summaries" (Part I, Introduction [xiii-xvi], Appendices [251-278]).<sup>4</sup>

The version of the Kumaoni bard Gopī Dās recounts the love story of the trader's daughter *Rājulā* and the Katyūrī king *Mālūsāhī*. Her parents promise her to a Tibetan prince, but during a trading expedition with her father she falls in love with *Mālūsāhī*. When her father realizes this, he brings her back home immediately. But she runs away and after many adventures reaches *Mālūsāhī*. However, she leaves him again, because she wants to be "conquered" by him. While attempting the conquest, he is poisoned by her parents but revived again by two Gurus of his family. In all versions of the epic magic plays an important role. This is ascribed to influences from the yogic sects of the *Nāths* and the *Siddhas*.

There are a number of philologically problematic aspects to the translation and glossary (see the reviews of Buddruss (1988) and Kimmig (1987)). Moreover, Buddruss has already pointed to (1988: 164) Meissner's classicist treatment of the epic. Meissner speaks of a "complete critical edition" (1985 I: vii), for which he thinks it necessary to add "as a critical apparatus" (1985 I: xxvi) "the deviating forms of the informants" (ibid.) with whom he worked. He is searching for origins - "His [the bard's] narrative seems to be nearest to the original" (1985 I: xx) - and for connections with the classical traditions (he demands to know of his bard whether he is acquainted with the notion of *gadya-padya* from Sanskrit poetics [1985 I: 241]),<sup>5</sup> though he says he himself is not able to pursue questions of textual history (1985 I: xvii). But he also displays little confidence in his bard. He qualifies important statements made by the bard - e.g., that the performance of the epic is a *jāgar* (1985 I: 219)<sup>6</sup> and that *Mālūsāhī* and other Katyūrī kings became deities after their deaths (1985 I: 239) - with expressions like "For him..." or "he thinks..." (1985 I: 213), or he questions his trustworthiness with statements like the following (1985 I: 213): "at 14 he could already sing the whole song - at least that is how he remembers it."

Attempts to shift the focus of authority from the bards to the experts are perhaps the rule rather than the exception. Upreti's book (n.d.) on the same epic is even more instructive. Upreti, who is "a well-known expert on Kumāūnī folklore" (Meissner 1985 I: xv), stresses the "secular character of the story" (Upreti n.d.: 7). There is a "complete freedom from ritualistic taboos. Its singing may sometimes send a listener into a trance, but that is not what it is meant for..." (ibid.). "This secular character demarcates Malushahi from other ballads of Kumaon in which the hero or the heroine, even though human in origin, gets transformed into a deity" (Upreti n.d.: 8-9). This last sentence bluntly contradicts the statements of Gopī Dās (and other bards). Upreti is certainly right "that a search for authenticity would be futile"

(Upreti n.d.: 41), but he is also convinced that "[h]is [Gopī Dās] seems to be nearest to the original" (Upreti n.d.: 42).

Among the main actors of the epic are Gurus, whose names all end in *Dās*, which is a common designation of members of various yogic orders. Upreti says of them (Upreti n.d.: 60): "they are low caste professional drummers endowed with all kinds of magical powers." He goes on to stress that the Katyūrī kings depended heavily on them and, "This relationship of the king with his professional drummers who belong to the lowest rung of the social ladder sounds rather strange." This relationship, however, is basically the same as the one between Gopī Dās and his (deified) King *Mālūsāhī*, which, in turn, is a special case of the relation between a so-called *jāgarīa* and a deity.<sup>7</sup>

Even though Garhwal is one of the major centers of India's oral Mahabharata traditions, Meissner's observation regarding the "learned publications about the oral literature" seems to prove true here as well. Despite the following statements, no "complete" oral Mahabharata has been published so far. Sax (forthcoming) observes: "Nowhere, however, does the *Mahabharata* have such a tremendous social and religious importance as in the former Himalayan kingdom of Garhwal... The *Mahabharata* is the greatest single source of folklore in this predominantly Hindu region..." According to Leavitt (1991: 451), "the oral tradition in Kumaoni includes an enormous mass of *Mahābhārata*-related material."<sup>8</sup> And according to Hildebeitel (1988: 132), there are "astonishing parallels and significant variations... in the ways these two cults mythologize and ritualize the epic: one in the high mountains of India's far north, the other in the lowlands of the deep south, and with nothing to link them geographically or historically but Hinduism."

I cannot pursue the question of what Hildebeitel actually means by "the epic," but I would like to say that he himself asks with regard to the Mahabharata "whether one should privilege the classics" (1995: 26).<sup>9</sup> Moreover, there are not only "cults" of "the epic," but also "complete" oral regional versions, locally called *Paṇḍuaṇ* or *Paṇḍavaṇi*. The author of this paper has made tape recordings of one of them in the valley of the river Tōns in western Garhwal.<sup>10</sup> This version has been transcribed and translated (into German) and will probably be published next year. The existence of another "whole" oral epic in eastern Himachal Pradesh has been pointed out by Nanda (1993: 48) who notes, "B.R. Sharma has also attended night-long sessions held during Budhi Diwali in Nirmand where Fakiri Brahmans sing the Pandava Kavya narrating the entire battle of the Mahābhārata," and by the afore-mentioned B.R. Sharma himself (1993: 41): "The Pandavas are so powerful characters in the folklore of the State that a ballad of Pandavayan has special significance in Shimla, Solan and Sirmour regions." On page 42 he gives a short summary of the so-called ballad "Pandain or Pandavayan." More summaries of various regional episodes of the Mahabharata are found in many references given at the end of this paper.

Besides trends to "mythologize the epic" through natives and attempts to demythologize it again by experts on folklore, another possibility is to pursue

A.K. Ramanujan's question, "What happens when classical myths are borrowed and retold by folk performers?" Leavitt has taken this up (1991: 453) and formulated a number of answers in two similar articles (1988, 1991). He starts by bringing together what he regards as three "versions" of the "same" story: (1) The *Pāṇḍavas'* escape from the burning lacquer house and their subsequent encounter with the giantess *Hiḍimbā* - from the Critical Edition of the *Mahābhārata* (*Ādiparvan* 1.139-143). (2) A retelling in Hindi of an originally oral Kumaoni story - written by Upādhyay (1979: 279-80). In this story all of the *Pāṇḍavas* except *Bhīma* are kidnapped. *Bhīma* later manages to rescue them but has to deal with *Hiḍimbā* before he finds his family members. (3) A tape recording of an oral version of this story, sung by the Kumaoni bard Kamal Rām.<sup>11</sup>

Leavitt now tries to show that Ramanujan's four well-known features, which are supposed to characterize the process of borrowing - fragmentation of the text, domestication (humanization) of gods and heroes, localization of plots, and contemporization of action (1991: 453) - can be shown in various degrees in his two regional texts. Though he does not assume a straightforward transfer from the classical to the folk level, he nevertheless believes that this is the fundamental direction of movement (thus, he relates the Kumaoni versions to "their common source" (1991: 470; similarly 453). However, in light of Hildebeitel's above statement regarding parallels between Tamil and Garhwali Mahabharatas, Leavitt's assumption appears unlikely.<sup>12</sup> Let us briefly consider the four features:

1. Fragmentization: In some contexts only selected episodes of the oral epic are performed (Leavitt 1991: 455ff.; Sax 1991), whereas in others "complete" versions are sung (cf. Nanda, Sharma above). The version from the Ṭōns valley is sung annually from beginning to end during a festival in the month of February. Thus it seems as if we "members of a bibliocentric profession" (Sax forthcoming) see only the classical Sanskrit text as a *physical whole*, thereby forgetting that it was or is almost always recited in *fragments*.

2. Domestication: Leavitt mentions "Bhīm's prodigious urination" (1991: 453) in the bard's version. According to numerous local statements, however, *Bhīma's* "funny" nature is not at all human, but the result of a combination of divine and demonic elements in one person. On the other hand, a very human portrayal of *Bhīma* appears in classical Sanskrit dramas of Bhāsa (e.g. *Madhyamavyāyoga*).

3. The notion of localization makes sense only when original geographical structures have been projected onto a secondary plane. But again this does not coincide with. Various place names in the *Paṇḍuāṇ* from the Ṭōns valley are located in an otherworldly space rather than in a terrestrial province. Incidentally, the hypothesis is also up against Berreman's impression that the *Pāṇḍavas* "may well be indigenous objects of worship in these hills who have been universalized to become part of the literary tradition of Hinduism" (1963: 382).

4. Even the fourth feature of contemporization is problematic, when we

note that many Garhwalis regard the *Pāṇḍavas* as their ancestors (Leavitt 1991: 452; Sax 1991: 289)!

Finally, the classical version and the version of Kamal Rām differ not so much because of "extravagant local developments" (Leavitt 1988: 11), but because the lacquer house episode of the classical text does not correspond to the Himalayan story of the abduction of the *Pāṇḍavas*, but has parallels with another episode of the Himalayan Mahabharatas.

Sax's interest in the Himalayan Mahabharata, especially in the performances called *Pāṇḍavalīlā*, is guided by different motives: "It [the Mahabharata] illuminates social issues, and informs local culture more, perhaps, than any other text" (1991: 275). Thus, he not only deals with the fact that, "[e]ach village has its own tradition of dance and recitation" (1991: 277), but also thinks that one can "infer the folk cosmology of these Uttarākhaṇḍ peasants from their rituals" (1991: 293-94). In fact, many aspects of life in Garhwal have been influenced by the local Mahabharatas, for example, agonistic festivals (Hāṇḍā 1988: 112; Lalit 1993; Nanda 1993: 50; Zoller 1993), traditional warfare (Hāṇḍā 1988: 60), or ancestor worship (Sharma 1993: 41-42; Sax 1991: 289; Zoller 1994). And yet the Himalayan oral epics are neither shadows of classical models nor mere encodings of farmers' conceptions of the universe. Many bards known to me say that the epic "awakens" in them during performance, and it is not they who perform the epic, but the epic which celebrates itself.

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> In Hindi literary dictionaries *gāthās* are defined as forms of folk literature in which sung and spoken passages alternate.

<sup>2</sup> Its center is Kumaon, but there also exist Garhwali versions.

<sup>3</sup> The following critical remarks are not intended to detract from the enormous value of the work done by Meissner.

<sup>4</sup> There exists also a Hindi novel based on the epic (Vaiṣṇav 'Aśok' 1973).

<sup>5</sup> The notion means 'prose and verse'.

<sup>6</sup> Fanger 1990: 173: "A *jagar* is essentially a spirit possession séance in which a designated deity or deities (*devatas*) is induced by ritual drumming and the singing of traditional *devata* legends to possess a prearranged oracle/medium of the spirit."

<sup>7</sup> "The *jagarīa* is the main officiant of a *jagar* ceremony" (Fanger 1990: 176). Cf. note 6 above.

<sup>8</sup> The author works in Kumaon, but he is rightly aware that "[t]he association [of the *Pāṇḍavas*] is particularly strong with Garhwal..." (Leavitt 1991: 452).

<sup>9</sup> His is a paraphrase of the same question raised by Richman (1991).

<sup>10</sup> In fact, two tape recordings were made with two different bards. The two versions are, however, quite similar. A video recording of the performance has also been made.

<sup>11</sup> Leavitt's concern for what may happen to the classical myths is also expressed orthographically: he distinguishes the Kumaoni oral "mahābhārat" from the Sanskrit "Mahābhārata" (1988: 11). Also he seems to fulfill Meissner's prophecy: "As might be expected, such ritually-embedded sung poetry... presents special problems of editing, translation, and presentation. Rather than attempt this here, I offer instead a translation of a mahābhārat story as it was retold in ordinary Kumaoni prose (with occasional asides in Hindi)..." (1988: 5).

<sup>12</sup> Zumthor has pointed out (1990:23) the widespread attitude of regarding written poetry as "one's own" and oral poetry as "other." To overcome the apparent paradox of oral poetry being simultaneously "original" (see above) and "other," Chandola has found an elegant solution (1977:18): "The development of the Mahābhārata tradition from its earliest form to the Garhwali form of today seems to have this pattern: Folk to Classic to Folk." Here the first "Folk" is the "original" and the second the "other."

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