## On the Complexity of Oral Tradition: A reply to Claus Peter Zoller's review essay 'Oral Epic Poetry in the Central Himalayas'

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A few years ago, Claus Peter Zoller published a review essay in these pages on 'Oral Epic Poetry in the Central Himalayas (Kumaon and Garhwal)' (Zoller 1995), discussing publications by Konrad Meissner (1985), Mohan Upreti (n.d., published in 1980), William Sax (1991b), and myself (Leavitt 1988, 1991). Zoller accuses Meissner, Upreti, and me of bias in favour of written Sanskritic models over oral vernacular ones; and he criticizes Sax for seeking to explain oral epics in terms of the cosmologies and cultural categories of those who perform them. While the essay expresses some real divergences in approach between Zoller and the authors he discusses, many of Zoller's criticisms and even his quotations turn out on closer inspection to be misplaced or based on misreadings. At the same time Zoller's style, no doubt due to space limitations, is so condensed that one is often forced to infer his views *intaglio* from his criticisms of those of others. I felt, then, that a reply to his essay had to go over it point by point, sometimes unpacking arguments that are only alluded to in the original text. This is why this reply is almost comically longer than the text that provoked it.

While Zoller's critiques are various, they all seem to come from the same place: he appears to be interested primarily in complete and purely oral epics as autonomous entities, and in tracing their mutual relations and their influence on the lives of their bearers. This kind of approach can be illuminating, and Zoller has published two fascinating articles (1993, 1994) in which he interprets ethnographic data by tracing associations across the subcontinent and from tradition to tradition. But in this review essay, Zoller consistently sounds as if he believes that oral epics exist in a vacuum, somehow uninfluenced either by the daily lives of their bearers or by Sanskritic Hinduism—the latter in spite of the fact that the epics discussed are performed by and for people who identify themselves as Hindus, and who have Hindu names and access to Brahman priests.

### Oral poetry and alienation

Zoller opens by noting that oral poetry is often treated as "a special form of literature... 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." The task of the literate scholar of oral poetry, then, is "to mitigate the alienation thus created". The next sentence presents the subject matter of the essay: "I want here to introduce briefly a few approaches through which oral forms of poetry, in particular oral epics from the Central Himalayas... are made 'intelligible' to outsiders." Zoller seems to be posing an absolute and exaggerated dichotomy between the written and the oral: in fact, oral traditions often continue to exist in societies that use writing, and illiterate oral bards in South Asia are generally well aware of the presence and prestige of books (for a critique of tendencies to absolutize the written/oral distinction, see Finnegan 1977). Central Himalayan oral epics need to be made intelligible to people outside the region primarily because they are in languages most outsiders do not understand, and because they refer constantly to realities of which most outsiders will have no knowledge—not simply because they are oral and so, somehow, inherently unintelligible to an alienated literate audience.

In the second paragraph, Zoller illustrates folklorists' own alienation from orality by citing their failure to use indigenous categories. He says that in spite of the fact that "oral poetry in the Central Himalayas is still a dominant form... the majority of books about [Central Himalayan] oral poetry are modelled either on British folklore studies... or the systematics and terminology of... Sanskrit [poetics]... Thus, both approaches generally do not use indigenous terminology and classification." This is accurate for the work of British and British-educated Indian writers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, but it is unfair to Indian and other scholars who have been publishing on Central Himalayan oral traditions since the 1960s, and this for a number of reasons. First of all, many of these works are in Hindi, and Hindi draws its technical terminology from Sanskrit: it is virtually impossible to write about any kind of poetics in Hindi without using terms from Sanskrit poetics, just as it is virtually impossible to write about poetics in English without using terms from Greek (terms such as 'poetics'). Furthermore, it is not true that Hindi works on Central Himalayan folklore use "the systematics and terminology" of classical Sanskrit poetics: they only use its terminology to translate what for the most part are concepts from "the systematics" of Western folklore studies (Gaborieau 1974: 314). Beyond this, a number of Indian works on Central Himalayan folk literature (e.g. Pandey 1962, Chatak 1973) do in fact give a great deal of information on indigenous terminology and classification, even if this is not the main thrust of their presentation. These studies were drawn on, for instance, in Marc Gaborieau's pathbreaking attempt to classify Central Himalayan sung narratives on the basis, precisely, of "indigenous terminology and classification" (Gaborieau 1974: 320-9).

As an illustration of folklorists' failure to use indigenous categories, Zoller notes the differing labels they have used for the epic *Mālūśāhī*. Oakley and Gairola (1935) put it among the "Legends of Heroes"; the folklorist Govind Chatak (1973: 258) calls it a *pranay gāthā*, which Zoller glosses as 'love song'; Meissner (1985) calls it a ballad. The implication is that if these authors had paid more attention to indigenous classification, their labellings of the epic would have shown more agreement. But there are a number of problems with this argument. Zoller's translation of *pranay gāthā* as 'love song', apparently following Meissner's translation of Chatak's term (Meissner 1985: I, 261-3), is de-

batable. In fact, *gāthā* is used in folklore publications in Hindi to indicate a long narrative usually sung by specialists rather than by members of the public at large (Gaborieau 1974: 314, citing, among others, Chatak 1973: 208); it generally serves as a translation equivalent for the English 'ballad'. So the two contemporary scholars Zoller presents as disagreeing in fact do agree: both call *Mālūśāhī* a ballad. The term *gāthā* for *Mālūśāhī* seems to be universal among scholars writing in Hindi (e.g. Pandey 1962: 159ff., Upadhyay 1979: 146ff., Upadhyay and Pant 1980), while those writing in Western languages use either 'ballad' or 'epic'.

A more important problem with Zoller's critique is that it seems to ignore the specific complexity of Central Himalayan oral tradition, which includes a complex *Gattungslehre*, a set of explicit categories for narrative and non-narrative song and recitation. While there are certainly local and regional differences in this classification, and while different authors' presentations of it differ to some degree, the essentials seem to have been established (e.g. Gaborieau 1974, Leavitt 1985, Bisht 1988). As far as I can judge from the literature and from my own experience, in these indigenous classifications *Mālūśāhī* constitutes a category of its own, as do some other comparable bodies of narrative (e.g. epics about the Ramaul heroes). What the folklorists cited are trying to do is to fit *Mālūśāhī* into the most appropriate rubric they can find in international folklore studies. While Zoller is right in implying that this kind of off-the-rack categorizing is likely to lead to a bad fit, some term is still necessary to give non-Central-Himalayan readers an idea of what *Mālūśāhī* is—not because they are alienated from oral literature as such, but because they are ignorant of Central Himalayan traditions. In fact, every term one uses to categorize a text, oral or written, brings presuppositions and implications along with it. Zoller does not question his own use of 'epic', a word at least as loaded and potentially misleading as 'ballad' or 'hero-tale'. Gaborieau (1974) has proposed the term *récit chanté*, 'sung narrative', for the material that Zoller is calling "oral epic". Where the latter term suggests comparison with Homer (and Gairola calls these "legends... quite Homeric in spirit" in his preface to Oakley and Gairola 1935), Gaborieau's term (borrowed from Zumthor 1972) instead suggests more novel comparisons between Central Himalayan literature and society and those of medieval Europe.

Three named indigenous genres will be of central concern in what follows. One is *Mālūśāhī*, which is narrated in the third person at fairs and at organized festivities in village homes on long winter nights. A second is *jāgar*, stories of the regional divinities narrated in the second person directly to the divinity, in most cases in the body of a possessed medium, in nocturnal ceremonies also called *jāgar*, 'vigil' (see Gaborieau 1975, Quayle 1981, Fanger 1990, Leavitt 1997). The third genre, called *mahābhārat* or *bhārat*, includes stories of gods and heroes also found in the Sanskrit epics and Puranas, narrated in the third person as autonomous performances or at a given moment in the *jāgar* (Gaborieau 1974, 1975, 1977, Leavitt 1991, 1995).

## Mālūśāhī

Zoller begins his discussion with a critique of Meissner's 1985 edition of an oral performance of *Mālūśāhī* which includes the Kumaoni transcription with translation, notes, glossary, an interview with the bard, and a cassette recording of extracts from the performance. Zoller calls this a "very laudable project", which is a considerable understatement: as far as I know, Meissner's volumes still represent the only substantial Central Himalayan oral text to have been published with serious contextualization. Zoller accuses Meissner of showing too much deference to "great traditions" and not enough to the bard he is working with, the famous singer Gopi Das; he notes "a number of philologically problematic aspects" to Meissner's edition and cites a review by Georg Buddruss which "has... pointed to (1988: 164) Meissner's classicist treatment of the epic." This last point is quite misleading. Buddruss says that since this edition lacks the linguistic analysis which should have underlain the transcription of an oral text, Meissner seems closer to the traditional philology of written texts than to the linguistically based methodology of the study of oral texts; but he certainly does not accuse Meissner of a more general "classicist" bias. On the contrary, Buddruss goes on to criticize Meissner for failing to distinguish adequately between old Kumaoni words (*tadbhavas*), the many words borrowed from Sanskrit into Kumaoni (*tatsamas*), and words borrowed more recently from Hindi. If Buddruss is accusing Meissner of anything, it is of failing to appreciate the perduring presence and influence of Sanskrit on Kumaoni, that is, the exact opposite of a classicist bias.

Zoller then notes that Meissner speaks of "a 'complete critical edition' (Meissner 1985 I: vii [a misprint for page xvii])" with his commentary serving as a "critical apparatus" giving "the deviating forms of the informants' (Meissner 1985 I: xxvi)." But this only means that Meissner is not claiming personal authority for every point in the text, instead giving the reader all the varying opinions he could gather. Zoller goes on to say that Meissner "is searching for origins—'His [this bard's] narrative seems to be nearest to the original' (1985 I: 20)." Here Zoller is quoting Meissner quoting Upreti in *his* book on *Mālūśāhī*. The quote first comes (1985 I: xvi) in a report of Upreti's comparison of the versions of three bards and his conclusion that of these three, Gopi Das's seems nearest to the original because the other two show greater elaboration of details which Upreti interprets as later accretions. This argument is not convincing: since the work of Parry and Lord (Lord 1960), the baseline assumption about oral epic has to be that 'details' will be developed or simplified by a bard depending on factors such as time available and audience attitude. Meissner's own interest is in fact not in ultimate or classical origins, but in more immediate ones: he wonders whether *Mālūśāhī* might have a source outside Kumaon and proposes points of contact with the epic of Gopi Chand, which is sung throughout North India. He is thus looking not to the classical written tradition but to one widespread oral vernacular tradition as a likely source of a geographically more restricted one (1985 I: xvi-xx). In fact, if Meissner can be accused of presenting Kumaoni language and tradition in terms of something else, this is not Sanskritic written tradition but the Hindi language (as Buddruss notes) and oral traditions of the North Indian plains.

Meissner, Zoller says, is searching "for connections with the classical traditions (he demands to know of his bard whether he is acquainted with the notion of *gadya-padya* [prose and verse] from Sanskrit poetics [Meissner 1985 I: 241])." Here again, when we check the reference we find something quite different. Meissner is interviewing Gopi Das through an interpreter; he puts his questions in English, the interpreter restates them, often quite loosely, in Kumaoni, and the bard replies in Kumaoni. Here Meissner has noticed the difference, noticed by everyone acquainted with Central Himalayan oral epic, between passages of highly rhythmic singing and passages of apparently more prosaic declamation (e.g. Gaborieau 1974: 315, Sax 1991a: 16). Meissner calls the sung and spoken parts "verse" and "prose" respectively and glosses these terms as *padya* and *gadya*. While these terms are borrowed from Sanskrit, they are also the ordinary Hindi and the sophisticated Kumaoni words for verse and prose; in using them, Meissner is not giving Gopi Das an exam in Sanskrit poetics, but trying to give the interpreter a better idea of what he himself means.

Zoller then says that Meissner "displays little confidence in his bard," citing a couple of passages in which Meissner mildly qualifies the bard's statements "with expressions like 'for him...' or 'he thinks...' (1985 I: 213)". It is evident, on the contrary, that Meissner has the greatest admiration for Gopi Das, who was, indeed, revered by many who knew him; Meissner dedicates this work to his memory. In the middle of these supposed examples of attacks by Meissner on Gopi Das's credibility, Zoller gives one that is of great ethnographic interest. Meissner "qualifies important statements made by the bard—e.g. that the performance of the epic is a *jāgar* (1985 I: 219) and that Malushahi and other Katyuri kings became deities after their deaths (1985 I: 213)." As explained above, *Mālūśāhī* and *jāgar* are usually presented as different indigenous genres, performed in different situations with different styles and for different purposes. It is possible that they could overlap: since *jāgar* literally means a vigil, any narration performed at night could conceivably be called a *jāgar*. In both Kumaon and Garhwal the narratives sung to and about the goddess Nanda Devi are also called *jāgar*, and these do not necessarily involve possession (Sax 1991a). And it is true that ancient kings are often understood to have become gods after their deaths, and that some of these kings possess people and dance in *jāgar*s. So an argument could be made that in spite of what we had taken to be clear generic differences between *jāgar*s and *Mālūśāhī*, differences defined in large part by Gopi Das himself, who worked with Gaborieau as well as with Meissner and Upreti, here Gopi Das is saying that these two genres are really one and the same.

But is this what he is saying? Zoller cites two pages of Meissner's book. On page 219, Meissner asks the interpreter to ask the bard if he has sung *Mālūśāhī* mostly around his home or "in many villages and bigger places, at festivals and fairs (*melā*)?" The interpreter transforms this into something I translate as literally as possible as: "Where have you sung *Mālūśāhī*, having been invited by people, in fairs and so forth, here and there in other places?" Gopi Das's answer, again in my translation: "I'll tell the Sahib. Not in fairs and such, never in fairs and such." Indeed, throughout the interview Gopi Das makes

it clear that he sings only on specific invitation. He continues: "Yes, this is my own true work, my occupation, like this: all my own people say: 'Lay on a *jāgar*. For a little while give *Mālūśāhī* "jāgar lai lagā. zarā der mālūśāhī kaī di hāl"*. Perform (*ka* 'speak') now.' In every place, in every place" (my translation). This is what Zoller interprets to mean that Gopi Das is equating *jāgar*s and *Mālūśāhī*. Such an interpretation is easier to make on the basis of Meissner's translation, which has the people saying, "'Sing a 'jāgar'! Sing Malushahi for a little while!'" But what Gopi Das in fact seems to be saying is that he is regularly solicited to do *jāgar*s *and* to do *Mālūśāhī*, not that *Mālūśāhī* is a kind of *jāgar*. Gopi Das himself was famous above all for his performances of *jāgar*s of the regional divinities on the one hand (Gaborieau 1975, 1977), of *Mālūśāhī* on the other (Meissner 1985 I: 212), and it would make sense for him to refer to these two specialties in defending the legitimacy of his vocation.

The second page reference (page 213) is not to the interview, but to a summary of the interview in which Meissner says, "For [Gopi Das] Mālushāhī and the other Katyūr kings have become gods (question 49). In a so-called jāgar... these gods manifest themselves in the person thus possessed (question 51). Gopi Das thinks of himself as a servant ('dās') of the Katyūrs (question 51)." But when we look at this part of the actual interview, we find that Meissner has oversimplified the bard's answers in his summary. In question 49 (p. 239), Meissner asks how Gopi Das would feel if his sons and grandsons did not carry on the tradition. The bard answers: "I would be crying, my throat would get choked, indeed!... For four generations we had it in our family, for four generations! Crying overcomes me, Sahib! My throat gets choked, my throat gets choked. —They are gods, aren't they? At so many places they dance, the Katyūrs, they are gods, after all." Here Gopi Das is giving a religious motive for his grief at the prospect of the disappearance of Malushahi. This may well mean that Malushahi is thought of as a god, as many ancient kings are. But it does not necessarily mean that his epic is a *jāgar*. To say that a royal family dances in *jāgar*s is not to say that *every* member of the family so dances: both in the case of the Katyuri and the Chand dynasties, only a small number of figures actually appear in a *jāgar* (my observation, which tallies with Pandey 1962: 186-7); as far as I know, these figures do not include King Malushahi.

In question 51 Meissner (1985 I: 241) asks whether Gopi Das thinks singing *Mālūśāhī* "will bring him religious merit besides the material reward which he may get." The interpreter puts this more harshly: "When you are singing *Mālūśāhī* do you people only think of money or do you understand it to be like a puja to God or what?" (my translation). Not surprisingly, Gopi Das answers: "I understand them to be real gods. Why? They dance here in Kāṭli they are in Gīvāṛ. Tell him [i.e., tell Meissner]! They are believed in as gods. The Katyur are in Gīvāṛ, the Katyur dance, they are believed in as gods... If some other person disrespects them, then what can we do? But we believe in the gods. After all, we're a Das. We believe in the gods, in them, the kings of Katyur" (my translation). Gopi Das is insisting on the religious value of his work in order to defend himself against what he quite reasonably takes to be an impugning of his motives as solely financial. Note that

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at the end of his performance Gopi Das says, "[N]one of them [the Katyuri kings] was immortal. Immortal are their name and fame" and then, to Meissner himself, the listener, "Tomorrow you will die, Rājā, but your name will remain immortal!" (Meissner 1985 I: 204-5).

Zoller's next paragraph begins the discussion of Upreti's book on *Mālūśāhī*, which includes several tellings of the epic with explanatory essays. Here the accusation is of the elitism of expertise: "[a]ttempts to shift the focus of authority from the bards to the experts are perhaps the rule rather than the exception. Upreti's book on the same epic is even more instructive." Zoller then tells us that Upreti is "'a well-known expert on Kumauni folklore'" (he is quoting Meissner) and so, presumably, not to be trusted, and illustrates this by pointing to Upreti's characterization of *Mālūśāhī* as a "secular" story. What Upreti means by 'secular' is that the story can be performed without marked religious framing, a characteristic, he says, that "demarcates *Mālūśāhī* from other ballads of Kumaon in which the hero or heroine, even though human in origin, gets transformed into a deity" (Upreti n.d.: 8-9, cited by Zoller). To Zoller, this proves that the "expert" Upreti doesn't really understand the tradition he's writing about: "[t]his last sentence bluntly contradicts the statements of Gopi Das (and other bards)." But Upreti's text makes it clear that he is simply distinguishing *Mālūśāhī* from *jāgar*s: the example he gives of "ballads... in which the hero or heroine... gets transformed into a deity" is that of Ganganath, one of the best known *jāgar* divinities.

Zoller's next paragraph proposes some thought-provoking connections. He notes the importance in the epic of gurus "whose names all end in Dās, which is a common designation of various yogic orders." He quotes Upreti: "'[Dās] are low caste professional drummers endowed with all kinds of magical powers' (Upreti n.d.: 60)." True enough; but Upreti is talking about their role in oral epics, not necessarily in life, as Zoller's presentation of the quote implies. Upreti, Zoller writes, "goes on to stress that the Katyūrī kings depended heavily on them." Again, this sounds like a statement about Katyuri history, but in fact it is only about what happens within some renditions of the epic: in performances of *Mālūśāhī* by Das drummers, Das drummers are depicted "as superhuman [beings] on whom the Katyuria king is very much dependent." Upreti contrasts these Das tellings with that of a Rajput bard who replaces the Das gurus with a Rajput magician. So all this is not about the historical Katyuri court, but about singers giving members of their own caste starring roles in the epics they sing.

Zoller notes that Upreti finds this relationship between kings and low-caste drummers "rather strange." Zoller answers: "This relationship, however, is basically the same as the one between Gopi Das and his (deified) King Malushahi which, in turn, is a special case of the relation between a so-called *jagaria* and a deity." (The *jagariyā* is what the bard is called when he is running a *jāgar*.) This set of correspondences deserves more than this one sentence. Zoller is saying that there are three situations in which a low-caste drummer, a Das, serves as guru to a being of ostensibly much higher status: the scenes in *Mālūśāhī* in which low-caste drummers advise kings; the *jāgar* in which the drummer is the guru of the possessing god and gives the god orders; and the Das drummer's performance of the story of King Malushahi, which Zoller sees as a *jāgar* of the divinized king. While I am not convinced that these relationships are comparable, this kind of correspondence is worth pursuing. It can be compared with Gaborieau's attempt (1975) to construct a model of the relationship between the bard and different levels of divinity, based in part on the interpretations of Gopi Das. For me, the central problem with Zoller's presentation, here as throughout this essay, is the imposition of a single model on a number of different genres. This is an unwarranted simplification of a complex tradition, and one that in this case is not justified by Gopi Das's actual statements.

## *Mahābhārata* in the Central Himalayas

Zoller moves on to the *Mahābhārata*, appropriately lamenting the fact that "no 'complete' oral Mahabharata has been published so far" from the central Himalayas in spite of the epic's great importance in this region. He adds the apparent *non sequitur* that "according to Hiltebeitel, there are 'astonishing parallels and significant variations'" in the ways traditions "'mythologize and ritualize the epic'" in Garhwal in the far north and in Tamil Nadu in the far south, regions "'with nothing to link them geographically or historically but Hinduism'" (Zoller, p. 3, citing Alf Hiltebeitel 1988: 132). What do these parallels between north and south have to do with the matter at hand? Zoller gives us a hint: "Hiltebeitel... asks with regard to the Mahabharata 'whether one should privilege the classics' (1995: 26)." Zoller doesn't tell us that Hiltebeitel, who is quoting this question from Paula Richman (1991: 8-9), does not himself come clearly down on either side. Zoller continues: "[m]oreover, there are not only 'cults' of 'the epic,' but also 'complete' oral regional versions" of the *Mahābhārata* in western Garhwal and Himachal Pradesh. I must infer from this that Zoller himself believes that over the last several thousand years ritualized *Mahābhārata*s of the type found in Garhwal and Tamil Nadu, as well as complete oral versions, have grown up across South Asia without special influence from the recensions of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, which was nevertheless present as a more or less fixed entity throughout the Hindu world. A more subtle way of conceptualizing the relationships among traditions is offered by A.K. Ramanujan in his chapter in Richman's book. "Ramanujan," Richman writes in her introduction, "likens the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition to a pool of signifiers... arguing that each *Rāmāyaṇa* can be seen as a 'crystallization': 'These various texts... relate to each other through this... common pool. Every author... dips into it and brings out a unique crystallization'" (Richman 1991: 8, citing Ramanujan 1991a: 45-46; for the same metaphor applied to the *Mahābhārata*, see Ramanujan 1991b). But do all crystallizations have the same effects? In the sentence following the passage quoted, Ramanujan distinguishes "great texts" and "small ones". "The great texts rework the small ones, 'for lions are made of sheep'... And sheep are made of lions, too... In this sense, no text is original, yet no telling is a mere retelling—and the story has no closure, although it may be enclosed in a text." So Ramanujan is not saying that all tellings are

equal: *sometimes* local tellings can best be understood as deriving from classical ones.

Zoller then turns to two articles of mine that compare four tellings of the story of Bhima and his demon lover: one from the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*; one from a book on Kumaoni folklore written in Hindi (Upádhyay 1983; translated *in extenso* in Leavitt 1988: 3-4, retold with translated extracts in Leavitt 1991: 454-6); and two from recordings that I made with the bard Kamal Ram Arya in Kumaoni, once as a paraphrase (translated *in extenso* in Leavitt 1988: 5-11), once in performance-style recitation (retold with translated extracts in Leavitt 1991: 459-68). I maintained in these essays that one cannot generally presume either an independent indigenous origin or a classical derivation for oral epics, but must consider them case by case and genre by genre. The narratives in most Kumaoni oral genres are clearly regional in provenance, featuring characters and incidents that are not to be found in the Sanskritic great tradition nor, as far as I can tell, in other South Asian regional traditions. Yet there is one named genre of oral epic, performed, like the others, in the Kumaoni language by bards who are usually illiterate, which features characters and incidents that are clearly related to those in the Sanskrit epics and Puranas: they tell stories of Ram, Krishna, Shiva, the Great Goddess, the Pandavas, Puranic kings, ascetics, and demons. Narratives of this genre—all of them, not just the stories of the Pandavas— are called *mahābhārat* or *bhārat* (Pandey 1962: 171; Gaborieau 1974: 323-4). In Kumaoni oral tradition, then, the word *mahābhārat* does not mean only material relating to the Pandavas, but names an indigenous genre that only includes material related to classical Hindu myth—material that has also long been available to rural Kumaonis in orthodox tellings by Brahman priests. This appears to be a different situation from that in Garhwal, where an elaborate and distinct ritual tradition, involving possession, has grown up specifically around the Pandavas (Sax 1991b).

Given the close fit in character and incident between all *mahābhārat* narrations and their classical correspondents, and given that Kumaon has been on pilgrimage routes for millennia and that certain strata of Kumaoni society have been bearers of Sanskritic influence at least since the early Middle Ages (Joshi 1988: 78; Pathak 1988), the evident conclusion is that, unlike other genres of Kumaoni oral tradition, Kumaoni *mahābhārat* are derived from classical Sanskritic myth and epic. Since Pandava stories are *mahābhārat* among others, this conclusion holds for them as well. It happened that this genre was the one I was writing about in the articles Zoller discusses, precisely because I was interested in what the relationship might be between very different tellings of a story with a single source. For the same reason, I did not attempt to link the stories I was discussing with oral Pandava epics from elsewhere in the Himalayas. To point out this lacuna in my essays is perfectly fair, and to suggest links along the Himalayan chain is exactly the kind of comparative research that is needed (I attempted to do something like this on modes of possession in Leavitt 1994); but Zoller goes further and accuses me of the general bias toward the Sanskritic great tradition of which he has already accused Meissner and Upreti.

Zoller begins by presenting my essays as attempts to answer Ramanujan's question "What

happens when classical myths are borrowed and retold by folk performers?" (Ramanujan 1986: 64-8). This question presupposes that some folk narratives are in fact borrowed from classical myths. Clearly unhappy with this possibility, Zoller begins: "[Leavitt] starts by bringing together what he regards as three 'versions' of the 'same' story" (p. 4). Zoller's disapproval is marked by the use of scare quotes. In fact, my use of the word 'version' here is that of ordinary English: the folk and classical renditions in question (there are four, not three, of them) have main characters who go through most of the same things and who have names that are different only as would be predicted by the differing pronunciations of borrowed Sanskrit words in the languages in question. Oddly, Zoller permits himself to use 'version' without inverted commas throughout his essay. Ramanujan prefers "the word *tellings* to the usual terms *versions* or *variants* because the latter terms can and typically do imply that there is an invariant, an original or *Ur*-text" (1991a: 24-5). But of course in some cases, as in the ones I was discussing in these essays, an *Ur*-text is exactly what there seems to have been.

Zoller opens a footnote to this sentence (p. 6, n.11) which begins, "Leavitt's concern for what may happen to the classical myths is also expressed orthographically." Here he is referring to my distinguishing the Kumaoni word *mahābhārat*, used as a generic name for all narrative about epic and Puranic characters, from the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, the epic whose central story is that of the Pandava brothers. I felt it was important to differentiate between the Sanskrit epic and Kumaoni oral epics, for both of which Zoller indiscriminately uses the term Mahabharata. The footnote continues that I seem "to fulfill Meissner's prophecy," cited on page 2, that "soon there will be no more singers alive... all that [will be] left of these wonderful songs will be meagre summaries standing in library shelves." Zoller offers me up as the exemplar of the meagre summary method because in the earlier of my two essays (1988: 5) I did not transcribe an actual performance of the text in question. Zoller does not mention that this essay includes a full translation of a retelling by the same bard from whom I had recorded a sung performance, albeit not in a ritual context; nor does he mention that in my 1991 essay I do include translated extracts from the bard's song, with two pages of Kumaoni-language originals in an appendix. In other papers and publications I have been able to present more extensive bardic texts (Leavitt 1995, 1997), including the complete text and translation of a *jāgar* performance that includes a *mahābhārat* of Lord Shiva (Leavitt 1985, only now, alas, being edited for publication).

The next paragraph sets up Zoller's criticism of my use of Ramanujan's four features of material borrowed from classical to folk traditions: fragmentization, domestication, localization, and contemporization. "Leavitt... tries to show that Ramanujan's four well-known features, which are supposed to characterize the process of borrowing... can be shown in various degrees in his two regional texts." (It's three regional texts, not two.) This makes it sound like I'm using Ramanujan to help prove that the direction of movement is from classical to folk. On the contrary, by the time I get to these criteria (which I cite only in the 1991 article), I feel I've already shown, for the reasons given above, that

*these particular texts* "seem clearly derived from epic and Puranic models" (1991: 453). I raise Ramanujan's features not to demonstrate what I feel has already been demonstrated, but to categorize some of the divergences that arise through oral vernacular transmission from a classical source and to propose that some of the tellings I was considering had diverged further from this source than others had. Ramanujan recognized that the hypothesis of such transmission was sometimes warranted, and he meant his model to apply to such cases, not to all of South Asian narration. On the contrary, Ramanujan's work as a whole defends a dialectical model of the relationship between folk and classical, particularly against top-down classically based models of South Asian civilization (Leavitt 1992: 39-40).

Zoller's main text continues: "Though [Leavitt] 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')." "Fundamental direction of movement" can mean three different things:

1. If it refers only to the stories I present in these essays, Zoller is correct: I do, indeed, think that these Kumaoni *mahābhārat* have a common source in Sanskritic tradition. New evidence may, of course, change my mind on this.

2. If it refers to the transmission of stories about the Pandavas in general, then each case must be decided on its own merits. Every telling of stories of the Pandavas both incorporates local material and, in most cases, has been influenced by the presence of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, a 'lion' text if there ever was one. If I may cite myself: "Since its crystallization between the fourth century B.C. and the fourth century A.D., the [Sanskrit] *Mahābhārata* has provided material for regional and local traditions all over the subcontinent and wherever Hindu civilization has had an influence. Vernacular versions of the epic have generally remained autonomous while developing according to specific cultural dynamics alongside and in interaction with the continuing transmission of the Sanskrit version" (Leavitt 1991: 447). What Zoller seems to be saying in the rest of his essay is that "the Himalayan Mahabharata" is an autonomous indigenous production that has grown up uninfluenced by the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, if indeed it is not the latter's direct source. Again, given the nature of the indigenous genre of which they are part, I don't think this can be the case for the Kumaoni stories I have presented.

3. Saying that Leavitt believes that "this is the fundamental direction of movement" without any further qualification suggests to the reader that I claim that oral epic poetry in South Asia is generally derived from Sanskritic models. That this is Zoller's meaning is strongly suggested in the last sentence of his essay, which attacks the view, presumably mine, that "the Himalayan oral epics are... shadows of classical models" (p. 5). This is not my position, and wasn't in these articles. It is ironic that just after they appeared I published a paper (Leavitt 1992) specifically criticizing 'holist' approaches that derive local and regional traditions from Sanskritic sources—but also criticizing 'separatist' or 'nativist' approaches which try to treat local traditions in South Asia as if they existed in a vacuum

free of Sanskritic influence.[1] We needed, I argued, more complex models, and I attempted to give a more complex picture of the interaction of vernacular and classical traditions in one of the essays under discussion (1991: 444-6). But, given what seem to me to be Zoller's own nativist tendencies, it is not surprising that he should read me as a classicizing holist.[2]

At the end of this paragraph, Zoller says that my putative assumption of unidirectionality is rendered unlikely by the parallels between *Mahābhārata*s in Garhwal and in South India. One must infer that Zoller's general vision is one in which traditions arise and interact throughout South Asia, sometimes coalesce into 'lion' texts, but do not undergo any important influence from these texts once they are constituted. This reminds me of Claude Lévi-Strauss's presentation of pre-Columbian America as "a Middle Ages that had never had its Rome: a complex mass, itself grown out of an ancient syncretism whose own texture was probably quite loose... [A given] group [of myths]... owes its character to the fact that it represents, as it were, a crystallization within an already organized semantic milieu, whose elements have served for all kinds of combinations" (Lévi-Strauss 1964: 16; my translation). In such a world, in which culture areas are constantly swapping stories and symbols, so that each draws on a limited 'pool of signifiers', 'crystallizations' in widely separated regions can show 'astonishing similarities', as indeed Lévi-Strauss (1971) sees between myths in northern California and central Brazil. This, I have the impression, is Zoller's South Asia. But in fact South Asia is far more like medieval Europe as it really was: South Asia did have the equivalent of Roman Empires and of Christianity carrying common influence across a vast region, and part of this influence was that

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[1] The article was summarized in an essay on "Recent Anthropological Research on Garhwal and Kumaon" by Antje Linkenbach and Monika Krengel (1995). In a footnote (1995: 14, n. 12), the authors accuse me of inconsistency: they feel that my arguments have demolished holism to the point that it is "quite amazing" that I should continue to consider holist characterizations of South Asian civilization to be of any validity at all. They ask two rhetorical questions, the first of which is in two parts. Question 1a: "If regional traditions do not fit into the 'general pattern' is it justified to recognize this pattern as 'general'?" My argument was precisely that regional traditions both do and do not fit into the "general pattern"; that "fitting" versus "not fitting" is too simple a dichotomy to be useful in other than rhetorical questions. Question 1b: "If Brahmanical 'sanskritic Hinduism'... has itself to be seen as a result of historical change—is it justified to take this hegemonial and limited pattern as generally valid, transcending time and space?" I don't think that it transcends time and space, but that it has been important over a very large space for a very long time, and that it has given, for instance, a strongly hierarchical and 'context-sensitive' tone to a great deal of South Asian discourse and practice (cf. Ramanujan 1989), particularly when contrasted with the comparatively individualistic and 'context-free' tone of much of modern Western discourse and practice. Question 2: "Cultural holism does necessarily reduce the multidimensionality of cultural interpretations by *constructing* a single one. Why then oppose and compare 'constructs'?" But what else can we oppose and compare but constructs? We are not gods; we have no direct, unconstructed understanding of a complicated world. A portrayal of discourse and practice in one village or in one region is no less a construct than such a portrayal for a whole civilization. The issue is not to abandon constructs but to produce good ones, constructs that fit as much of the data as possible, and

of 'lion texts' such as the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*.

Zoller's sentence about Garhwal-South India parallels has a footnote attached to it (p. 6, n. 12) which refers back to the beginning of the essay and recalls Paul Zumthor's views on oral poetry and alienation. This time Zoller's target is the Garhwali-born linguist Anoop Chandola. "Zumthor has pointed out 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'." Here, as throughout his essay, Zoller is imputing anxiety about orality to scholars who devote their lives to preserving and studying oral traditions. All Chandola is doing in the quote given is proposing a formula for the most reasonable model of *Mahābhārata* transmission, particularly in Garhwal; he is not working through some fancied paradox in his feelings about oral poetry.

The paragraph we are discussing started with my use of Ramanujan's four features. Since Zoller thinks that I am using these features to "prove" my "hypothesis" of such a transmission, he proceeds to take issue with each of them.

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that can be criticized and then superseded by better ones. It is true that the bulk of my article is spent attacking holism. I chose to do this because variants of holism have dominated South Asian studies for the last forty years. But I fear that for this reason Linkenbach and Krengel have mistaken me for an inconsistent separatist, when what I say in the article is that while both holism and separatism have things to offer, neither is an adequate general model of a civilization.

[2] While the content of holist-separatist debates may differ, their tone is often very familiar. After the romanticism of the early nineteenth century, which saw oral texts as the ancient and authentic voice of the people, early twentieth-century literary studies held that most oral literature was 'high' literature that had percolated down to the masses. Zumthor cites "the extreme theories which... dominated university teaching for the first third of our century: that all of popular art is nothing but 'shipwrecked culture'" (Zumthor 1983: 26, my translation). Closer to home, consider the exchange in these pages between Brigitte Steinmann and András Höfer over Höfer's (1994) way of editing and interpreting western Tamang shamanic texts. Steinmann (1996) says that Höfer exaggerates the separateness of western Tamang language and tradition from (the great tradition of) Tibetan Buddhism. She claims that many of the phrases for which Höfer seeks local western Tamang interpretations are really standard Tibetan Buddhist ritual phrases which Höfer fails to recognize, presumably because of a (separatist) aversion on his part to admitting how Buddhist the Tamang are. Höfer (1996) replies that it is Steinmann who has been misled by assuming that her eastern Tamang informants, who are more heavily influenced by Tibetan Buddhism than are the western Tamang, can give her the true explanations of western Tamang texts. I don't know who's right here, since the substance of this argument is Tamang to me. But I do recognize the tone.

## 1. Fragmentization

To argue that Himalayan versions of *Mahābhārata* stories have not been fragmented, Zoller refers to his earlier statement about the existence of "complete" oral *Mahābhāratas*. But neither Ramanujan nor I claim that fragmentization is a necessary feature of movement from classical to regional materials, only that it is a common one. And it does not mean that different episodes are unrelated to one another, only that the material is performed in episodes. Zoller further cites a manuscript by Sax proposing that "we 'members of a bibliocentric profession' (Sax) tend to see only the classical Sanskrit text as a physical whole, thereby forgetting that it was or is almost always recited in fragments." But this isn't true of all long Sanskrit texts. The Veda, while it is used in fragments in rituals, is memorized as several enormous wholes. The *Rāmāyaṇa*, in the Sanskrit version as well as in the Awadhi of Tulsi Das, is commonly recited, in Kumaon as elsewhere, in long unbroken sessions. And even if the *Mahābhārata* is usually recited in pieces—as the Bible is usually read and recited in pieces by Christians and Jews—this need not imply that the reciters lack a sense of it as a whole. Ramanujan, to cite him again, showed how different parts of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* echo one another, giving a sense of completion to the text (Ramanujan 1991b). At the same time, the whole of which a text is part may not be a purely narrative one. A great deal of my 1991 paper was devoted to showing how *mahābhārat* narration fits into a ritual whole: it has its place in a *jāgar*, above and beyond its presupposition of earlier and later episodes in the lives of Ram, Krishna, or the Pandavas.

## 2. Domestication

Ramanujan says that classical stories are often re-situated in familiar household settings when they are retold in the vernacular. I cited the incident of Bhima's urinating on the demons, present only in the tellings that I recorded, as a highly domesticated feature of the oral performance. Zoller contends that according to his Garhwali informants, "Bhima's 'funny' nature is not at all human, but the result of a combination of divine and demonic elements in one person" (p. 4). This sounds correct; it also sounds familiar. In my paper, I wrote that "Bhīma is the most 'demonic' of the Pāṇḍavas, something this marriage [with the demoness] serves to highlight" (1991: 449). Bhima's combination of features is also found in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* (as I note on the same page). In spite of all this, however, Bhima does not, as far as I know, urinate on the demons in any recension of the Sanskrit text. Zoller does not mention the other examples of domestication that I give: in the Kumaoni oral epic, the Pandavas live in a village house with their mother, who tells them what to do, very much as small, fierce Kumaoni mothers can be heard ordering their large sons about, and the motives for the action are the domestic concerns of doing *pūjā* and finding food.

## 3. Localization

Zoller writes, "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." Even allowing for the misprint, this is not clear. Ramanujan never claimed that all oral vernacular renditions of classical stories were re-set in local geography, only that it was a common feature of such renditions.[3] Zoller then says that the "hypothesis" of localization—it's more of an observation than anything so grand as an hypothesis—"is also up against Berreman's impression that the Pandavas '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)." (Zoller does not mention that I cite this passage from Berreman in both of the essays discussed [Leavitt 1988: 11, 1991: 452].) Scholars generally think that the Sanskrit epics as we have them are the result of the relative fixation in a number of regional 'recensions' of an older mass of oral epic (e.g. Pollock 1986: 37, Dunham 1991, the former cited in Leavitt 1991: 445, n. 3); in some cases, as I am concluding for Kumaoni *mahābhārat*, this relatively fixed Sanskrit text has served in return as a main source for some oral tellings: in these cases, we have Chandola's 'Folk—Classic—Folk' continuum. Given the importance of the Pandavas in the Himalayas, Berreman was speculating that this region may have been the original source of the oral traditions that went to make up the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*. This is an attractive idea, but it is only a speculation, not an "impression" that another idea could be "up against".

## 4. Contemporization

"Even the fourth feature of contemporization is problematic, when we note that many Garhwalis regard the Pandavas as their ancestors!" (pp. 4-5). But contemporization does not mean that a story is supposed to have happened this morning or last week, but that the world in which it takes place is like the world of today. The Pandavas, as far as I know, do not use guns in any recension of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*; they do in the vernacular versions which I report.

"Finally," writes Zoller, "the classical version and the version of Kamal Rām... differ not so much because of 'extravagant local developments' [citing 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." Since this is all Zoller says, I have no idea what to do with it; we await more. As for the extravagance of the developments I present, the reader will have to look at my papers and judge.

## Conclusions

The last paragraph of Zoller's essay contrasts three sets of motives for studying Himalayan folk traditions: 1. to show how Himalayan culture is influenced by the Himalayan *Mahābhārata* (good); 2. to show how local *Mahābhāratas* convey local cosmology, or to try to infer this from the texts (questionable); 3. to try to show that local *Mahābhāratas* are derived from the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* (bad). The good motive is Zoller's own, and

[3] Sax has written that the Garhwali Pandava Lila "localizes" the epic figures of the *Mahābhārata* in exactly the sense I use here (1995: 150, n. 15, citing Ramanujan 1986).

he also attributes it to Sax (although, as we shall see, Sax slips): "Sax's interest in the Himalayan Mahabharata... is guided by different motives" from the bad ones displayed by Leavitt, and perhaps also by Upreti, Meissner, and the footnoted Chandola. Zoller then quotes Sax to illustrate his good motives: "'[The *Mahābhārata*] illuminates social issues, and informs local culture more, perhaps, than any other text' (1991b: 275)." Zoller approves of this; he continues a few lines further down that, "[i]n fact, many aspects of life in Garhwal have been influenced by the local Mahabharatas, for example, agonistic festivals, traditional warfare, or ancestor worship," and for each of these he gives references (two of which are for Himachal Pradesh, not Garhwal) which either repeat the point that some people worship the Pandavas as their ancestors or present agonistic or non-agonistic games in which one side identifies with the Pandavas, the other with the Kauravas.

But we already knew the Pandavas were important in the Himalayas; why detail this now? It's apparently to distinguish Zoller's project of showing how local culture is influenced by "the Himalayan Mahabharata" from the more familiar anthropological one of using ritual and text as sources for inferring a people's cosmology and cultural categories. This is Sax's second set of motives, about which Zoller is not at all convinced. "Thus, [Sax] not only deals with the fact that, '[e]ach village has its own tradition of dance and recitation' (1991[b]: 277)"—this apparently is a good thing—"but also thinks that one can 'infer the folk cosmology of these Uttarakhand peasants from their rituals' (1991[b]: 293-4)"—apparently not so good, judging by the contrast between "deals with the fact that" and "thinks that".

Zoller finishes his essay by writing that "[m]any 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" (p. 5). Indeed, it is quite possible that bardic tradition has an ideational basis distinct from the culture of the general population; this seems to be the case in west-central Nepal, where Gregory Maskarinec (1995) refers to a distinct "culture of shamans". But it is its penultimate sentence that sums up the essay as a whole: "[a]nd yet the Himalayan oral epics are neither shadows of classical models nor mere encodings of farmers' conceptions of the universe." The first of these clauses sums up Zoller's critique of Meissner, Upreti, and myself, the second that of Sax. I hope that my reply has shown how tendentious this summing up is. Remember that Zoller began his essay by accusing literate scholars and the literate public of exaggerating the simplemindedness of the oral; on the contrary, a glance at the publications reviewed here gives an overpowering sense of the complexity of oral tradition—in the sophistication of local reflections on genre and context, in the variety of sources from which these traditions draw, and in the delicate interactions between pretty coherent old traditions and life today. In contrast, Zoller himself seems to be proposing a simplified oral tradition that is free of contamination from great traditions and which influences daily life but remains untouched by it. His review seems to me to deny the complexity of Central Himalayan oral traditions, a complexity that has been recognized by virtually all 'outsiders' who have worked in the region, Indian and foreign, as well as by 'insiders' who take an interest in bardic craft.

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