A KYRGYZ SINGER OF TALES: FORMULAS IN THREE PERFORMANCES OF THE BIRTH OF MANAS BY TALANTAALY BAKCHIEV

Abstract. In 2017, the Analyzing Kyrgyz Narratives (AKYN) Research Group, based at the American University of Central Asia, made three separate recordings of Talantaaly Bakchiev performing an account of the birth of Manas. This paper examines Bakchiev’s performances in regard to Parry and Lord’s theory of formulas in oral traditions. The paper suggests that, contrary to Parry and Lord’s concerns about the effect of literacy on the composition of oral literature, the method of improvisation they saw in illiterate bards can also be present in a highly-literate performer. A modern performer can use printed variants (and audio recordings) in the same manner an illiterate performer would reuse formulas learnt from their mentors. The paper proposes that a database of variants would allow this aspect to be studied further.

Key words: «Manas» epos, Talantaaly Bakchiev, Milman Parry, Albert B. Lord, AKYN Research Group.
From the moment Kyrgyz heroic poetry was first transcribed in the mid-nineteenth century, scholars have questioned the vitality of the tradition. Claims it has become moribund, changed indelibly, or a mere imitation of former glories, are frequent. Those deemed responsible include sedentism, Soviet scholarship, new technology, mass media, globalization, and the uninterested youth. Such claims disregard the continuation—and, at times, resurgence—of Kyrgyz oral heroic poetry in the turbulent twentieth century and its apparent renewal in the twenty-first. This short study examines three variants by the same manaschi—a performer of the Manas epos—the same part of the Manas epos recorded on different occasions. Rather than making sweeping claims about the vitality of the tradition and making value judgments, this paper establishes what can be said about a specific manaschi, Talantaaly Bakchiev (b. 1971), his use of formulas in performance, and his influences. With regards to this individual performer, it suggests that the traditional methods of oral poetry are still present and concludes by proposing a database to further scrutinize such details.

In 2017, a group of scholars connected to the American University of Central Asia (AUCA) established the Analyzing Kyrgyz Narrative (AKYN) Research Group. AKYN was founded to use technology to reveal new insights into Kyrgyz heroic poetry. I proposed that AKYN should record the same passage of the Manas epos on different occasions being performed by the same manaschi. The method of recording variants is long established; the Homeric scholar, Milman Parry, explained the purpose of such a practice.

Briefly, the aim wherein it differs from the form of written story poetry. Its method was to observe singers working in a thriving tradition of unlettered song and see how the form of their songs hangs upon their having to learn and practice their art without reading and writing.

Parry was influenced by comments made by Wilhelm Radloff who had collected Kyrgyz epic poetry in the mid-nineteenth century. Parry’s student and successor, Albert Lord, expanded Parry’s statement. “Stated briefly”, Lord clarified in his The Singer of Tales:

oral epic song is narrative poetry composed in a manner evolved over many generations by singers of tales who did not know how to write; it consists of the building of metrical lines and half lines by means of formulas and formulaic expressions and of the building of songs by the use of themes. [...] By formula I mean “a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea.” This definition is [Milman] Parry’s. By formulaic expression I denote a line or half line constructed on the pattern of the formulas. By theme I refer to the repeated incidents and descriptive passages in the songs.

Two elements feature: the formula, and the theme. The latter Lord described as ‘a recurrent element of narration or description in traditional oral poetry’ that is ‘not restricted, as is the formula, by metrical considerations’. However, the role and number of such formulas in Kyrgyz epics is disputed; Karl Reichl has asserted that ‘Kyrgyz epics do not show the kind of formulaic density that is familiar from the analyses of Lord and Parry’, while noting ‘an element of stability in the transmission of Manas when it comes to typical


5 Albert B. Lord, ‘Composition by Theme in Homer and Southslavic Epos’, Transactions of the American Philological Association 82 (1951): 71-80 (p. 73).
I wanted to investigate this claim, and to see whether the Parry-Lord paradigm could be used to address a contemporary debate. A frequent complaint against modern day manaschis is that they are not ‘real manaschis’ (chïnïgï manaschïlar) who can improvise in the traditional manner, but rather ‘book manaschis’ (jattama manaschïlar) who have memorized the text from a book and therefore repeat when they perform. I wanted to study, first-hand, the features noted by Parry and Lord at work in a Kyrgyz context, and see what effect the literacy of the performer has – if any – on the performance. The focus of this paper consequently concerns formulaic expressions in the variants collected by AKYN; these texts, with lines numbered for reference, are being made available on our website.7

The subject of this study, Talantaaly Bakchiev, was the first manaschi recorded by AKYN.8 For a Kyrgyz audience, Bakchiev needs little introduction: he is one of the prominent manaschis mentioned in Kyrgyzstan’s successful 2013 application for Manas, Semetey, and Seitek to be listed as UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage.9 Foreign scholars are aware of Bakchiev because of his frequent performances and his appearance in Nienke van der Heide’s monograph Spirited Performance.10 He is a highly literate academician who has published several studies on the Manas epos, and previously taught at AUCA.11 The part of the epos selected was the birth of the hero Manas. This section was selected because it typically appears in narratives. Details of AKYN’s three recordings are as follows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variant</th>
<th>Lines</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>T₁</td>
<td>973</td>
<td>October 31th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T₂</td>
<td>1016</td>
<td>December 12th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T₃</td>
<td>1851</td>
<td>December 22nd</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As requested by AKYN, the first two performances were close to thirty minutes; the third was nearly an hour.12 Each audiovisual recording was made in the AUCA recording studios in front of a small audience. Kamila Baimuratova, an AUCA student, managed the equipment. Alymkan Jeenbekova, a student at the Kyrgyz Academy of Sciences, later transcribed the materials. It should be stressed that recording in such conditions removed many of the typical variables of performing Manas that would affect the poet’s composition of the material; it is hoped that these elements can be examined later in the course of AKYN’s research.

The three variants – T₁, T₂, and T₃ – reveal Bakchiev’s craft. Take the frequent word ‘мына’. Bar one notable example (from T₁, in Bakchiev’s spoken introduction), in all three variants Bakchiev only uses this word at the start of a line, suggesting that is habitual. The subsequent words can be grouped as follows to show the frequency of usage in the three variants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Мына ошондо жарыктык</th>
<th>40</th>
<th>Мына ошентип турганда</th>
<th>16</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Бай Жакып</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Айткандан</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Энеке</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Тургуча</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Акбалта</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Алгандан</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Чыырыды</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Бай Жакып</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Каракыз</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Жарыктык</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This investigation of this question is planned.
Visible in these lines is Bakchiev’s adherence to the traditional meter of the epos.

Recording multiple variants provides scholars the opportunity to see whether a performer has merely memorized a text or is capable of extemporizing at the moment of performance. Jeenbekova noted that Bakchiev depicts a sacrifice in all three variants while using seemingly no apparent signs of linguistic similarities. Below: $T_1$ is on the left, $T_2$ centre, $T_3$ right. Examination revealed a repeated phrase (printed below in bold).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sentence in Kyrgyz</th>
<th>$T_1$</th>
<th>$T_2$</th>
<th>$T_3$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Баягы жетеке келген күндө,</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Сурабая суранды</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Сурасад</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ак Балта</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Акчайым</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Кайран жан</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Кара-Айгыр</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>гана Акбала</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>гана энекең</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>гана Карасык</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>көркөмүң</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>баланың</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>байбиаче</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>бу бала</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>байкаса</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>атакем</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>катындар</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One can argue whether the line ‘Кайда экени билинбей’ is a formula (as the line fits the metrical requirements, and is repeatable) or a theme (as it coincides with a particular scene). Less arguable though is the finding that Bakchiev is not merely repeating a memorized text. The variance, rather, shows he is constructing a description of a set feature in the moment of performance.

The three variants provide further insight into Bakchiev’s methods of constructing a narrative in performance. Repetitive linguistic phrases – the ‘formulas’ described by Parry and Lord – are easier to establish with multiple performances. I used computer software designed to spot repetitions in texts – creatively employing plagiarism-spotting programs that note shared material in different variants. This quickly highlighted shared expressions between the different performances by Bakchiev. One of the clearest – and for the reader more visible – are repeated lines. T₁, T₂, and T₃ all include the following 2, 3, and 4 word lines that fit the required seven-syllable meter. The most frequent (with combined usage indicated) are the following.

Many of these one-line expressions contain no particular meaning. Bakchiev uses these lines to indicate shifts in the narrative, for emphasis, and to provide time to consider what will come next. As such, they are comparable to use of the expression ‘Кудай билет ким билет’ by the performer Kenje Kara in the earliest known recorded performance of Kyrgyz poetry. A 40-line example from T₁ on the left and a 36-line example from T₂ on the right below show how Bakchiev uses such expressions.

14 It should be noted that ‘Кайда экени билинбей’ appears elsewhere; the full list of its appearance is T₁: 97, 447, 452; T₂: 400, 958; T₃: 685, 690.

15 For a transcription, English translation, analysis, and copy of this recording, see The Semetey of Kenje Kara: A Kirghiz Epic Performance on Phonograph with a Musical Score and a Compact Disc of the Phonogram, ed. and tr. Daniel Prior (with the assistance of Ishembii Obolbekov in transcribing the Kyrgyz text) (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2006).
Мына ошондо Ак Балта
Сообол салса Жакынка
Мына ошондо бай Жакып
Айттын турат Балтага:
Айланайын Ак Балта!
Оо кыргызда катынды
Оо Кудай урлу кантейин?
Оой, энген тапкан малымдьы
Эсебин эми табабы?
Оо катынымдьы жин урду
Жин урганды дин урду
Атаганат дүңүйо
Энген тапкан малымдьы
Оой куршандыкка чалган деп
Азабындьы берди дейт
Атаганат дүңүйо
Арды мэнмет кунуго
Эми кокуи кантем деп
Мына ошондо бай Жакып
Жакып жайынсураба
Жакып жайын сурасан
Оо күндөрдүн бири закен
Бейшембинин күндөр закен
Оо Жуманын кадыр түнү закен,
Жуманын кадыр күнү закен,
Мына ошондой жан закен
Оо күндөрдүн бири закен
Айланайын кадыр закен
Эми кандай кыпшым? – деп
(Т1, 140-80)
Кыммат жайды көрөйүн.
Айланайын кадыр закен,
Жаным аман болсо деп,
Айланайын кадыр закен,
Жаным аман болсо деп,
Айланайын кадыр закен,
Кокуй, кокуй каран кун,
Жараткан жалгыз мен жалгыз,
Менден калар бу жалгыз,
Ушу курсагымда бала деп,
Оозун көргөн Чыйырды,
Чымындай жаны Чыркырач,
Канчылык кыйын болсо да,
Катын эмеспи Чыйырды,
Айланайын кадыр закен,
Катуураак ыйлады деп,
Караагызду чакырып,
Ал аңгыча болгон жок,
Ово көздө жарыктык,
Айланайын Чыракыз,
Калаадагы катынды,
Кокуй уйго жакын койбостон,
Токой көздөй айдагын,
Айылдағы аялды,
Айылга кокуи койбостон,
Альсыраак айдагын.
Коро албаган көз жаман,
Айланайын кадыр закен,
Сүйлөө койсо зөө жаман.
(Т3, 456-91)

The density of formulas within these two extracts suggests Kyrgyz epic poetry is similar to the poetry studied by Parry and Lord. Comparison of the start of T₁ and T₂ shows Bakchiev using repeated phrases, in the manner Parry and Lord noted for formulas and themes, to assist the construction of the narrative.

Миң күндөрдүн бири закен,
Кудайдын суйғөн күндөр закен,
Бейшембинин күндөр закен,
Жуманын кадыр түнү закен,
Ошоңдо көргөн бугүн жокпу? (Т1, 1-5)

The bold sections of the above quotation also appear in T₂, albeit later in the text following a versified opening.

Мына ошондо жарыктык,
Миң күндөрдүн бири закен,
Бейшембинин түнү закен,
Жуманын кадыр күндөр закен,
Мына ошондо Чыйырды. (Т2, 17-21)
Bakchiev uses such memorized formulas for the narrative when necessary for the performance.

The performer’s choice when to use these formulas is made apparent in the next example, where they appear much later in T₁ than T₂.

These examples show that Bakchiev has a toolkit of set phrases that can be used when necessary. Certain formulas can be repeated across the performances and within a single performance. Consider the following example from T₁:

The two-line formulation of the above lines in bold, “Күн эки күн жол жүрүп / Ат аябай мол жүрүп”, is repeated in this two-line form later in T₁ (403-4, 709-10, 951-52), and in T₂ (744-5, 830-31), and T₃ (387-88). Only on one occasion does Bakchiev employ a different second line.¹⁶ Bakchiev’s repeated lines fit with Parry’s definition of “a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea.”¹⁷ Such usage, in a contemporary literate performer, show that the methods seen earlier in the oral tradition are still present.

Formulaic expressions can also be studied to establish influence. Bakchiev has repeatedly stated that Shaabai Azizov (1927-2004) was his mentor. Jeenbekova noted that in T₃ Bakchiev uses phrases not from Azizov but from another performer: the famed Saghimbai Orozbakov (1867-1930). Below: Orozbakov is on the left, Bakchiev center, Azizov right.

¹⁶ T₃, 1614-15: Күн эки күн жол жүрүп, / Түнү такыр тынбасан.
¹⁷ Parry, Making of Homeric Verse, p. 272.
Bakchiev’s use of expressions from Orozbakov, who had died more than forty years before Bakchiev was born, reveals an interesting feature of an oral tradition: the reintegration of published material in performance. A modern performer can use printed variants (and audio recordings) in the same manner an illiterate performer would reuse formulas learnt from their mentors. Comparison of variants of the same performer reveals the methods of that performer; comparison of variants between performers reveals the transmission of the tradition. Comparing Bakchiev’s variants reveals information about Bakchiev; comparing a variant by Bakchiev with variants by Orozbakov and Azizov reveals the connections between performers. Identification of such phrases would be assisted by a database of variants of Kyrgyz heroic poetry. Such a resource would greatly aid scholars in recognizing the lineages and influences of other performers (both contemporary and past) made visible by the performer’s incorporation of material into his or her performance.20

In this specific case, Bakchiev’s bookish use of Orozbakov in the same manner an illiterate poet would have learnt lines from his or her instructor shows that different media is being used like a mentor by the modern oral poet. The rootedness of the current oral tradition in printed variants – particularly Orozbakov’s – is an element that requires further investigation.21 The widespread availability of printed versions by Orozbakov, and its frequent use as an influence (and source material) by modern performers, is a feature that requires closer scrutiny.22

Further study, with the assistance of technology, can provide greater insights. Comparison of formula usage with other contemporary performers might be able to establish whether such techniques are widespread, and to what degree improvisation is the norm. Another possibility is studying, with greater accuracy, the extent to which a performer, at different ages and stages of career, uses set phrases and formulas, i.e. whether a younger performer stays attached to a set text, and the older (and more established) is freer to deviate.23 With a database of variants, including those from the past and those of the future, it would be possible to see the fluctuations and continuations of the epic tradition over time, seeing the degree to which historical phenomena as well as technological and social change has influenced the content, and diagnose with more accuracy its current health.

18 Ш. Азизов, Манас эпосу, ред. Ш. Азизовдун (Бишкек: Кут бер, 2013), p. 43. Lines are not numbered in this volume.
20 The resource would also provide an unrivalled linguistic corpus for a Turkic language. This could, for example, chart changes and continuations in vocabulary. A prototype programme to analyze Kyrgyz grammar is being designed by Kamen Bonov and Anguelina Popova.
21 One issue, for instance, is which edition of Orozbakov is used – whether the harmonized Манас, Семетей, Сейтек, ред б. М. Юнусалиев (Фрунзе: Кыргызмамбас, 1958-1960), or the later attempts to print his oeuvre. On this, see my forthcoming ‘A Telling Tradition’.
22 Since Bakchiev has stated Sayakbai Karalaev (1894-1971) appeared in his calling dream and taught him how to recite, investigation into Karalaev’s versions accessible in print, film, and LPs would both illuminate the reception of earlier manaschis and the learning practices of modern manaschis. For Bakchiev’s study on calling dreams, see his Бакчиев О чудесном приобретении сказительского дара’; for other scholarly views, see Daniel Prior, Patron, Party, Patrimony: Notes on the Cultural History of the Kirghiz Epic Tradition (Bloomington: Indiana University Research Institute for Inner Asian Studies, 2000), p. 36, and Heide, Spirited Performance, pp. 119-129, and my forthcoming ‘A Telling Tradition’.
23 On this, see Lord, Singer of Tales, pp. 31-34.
Acknowledgments

This study was supported by the AMICAL Consortium programme enabled by a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and by an AUCA Faculty Research Grant. An earlier version of this paper was given at the Central Eurasian Studies Society conference in Pittsburgh, 2018, and a shortened variant published in their blog (http://thecessblog.com/2019/02/plumtree_akyн/). I would like to thank Talantaaly Bakchiev, and, in addition to my AKYN colleagues, Eva-Marie Dubuisson, Daniyar Karabaev, Nienke van der Heide, Simon Thomson, and my Spring 2019 AUCA Epic – Theory, Practice, and History’, ‘First Year Seminar’, and ‘Manas – Texts, Contexts, and Tradition’ students.

Bibliography