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Textualising an Oral Epic – Mission Completed

In this article I will briefly examine three cases that represent Lauri Honko's views on the textualisation of oral epics. Furthermore, these examples offer an insight into the concept of the paradigm, which was a key concept for Lauri Honko in the field of folkloristics and in the study of religion. The three case studies are as follows:

1. A literary folk epic based on an oral tradition: the 'singing scribe' Elias Lönnrot, who compiled a number of versions of his Kalevala on the basis of Kalevala-metric folk poems.

2. An epic based on multimedia documentation/fieldwork: the Siri Epic, sung by Gopala Naika. He was an erudite singer, who used to perform the epic on ritual occasions or in the work-song context.

3. An epic based on an archived oral tradition: the long epic of the Setu female singer Anne Vabarna, who produced a twin epic with the encouragement of the collector Armas Otto Väisänen, who dreamt about writing down such an epic.

These three examples all belong to the 'second life' category of folklore in the sense that all of them have been produced outside the 'system of communication' which maintains an item of folklore in its original setting (Honko 1990: 101–2, 113–14).

Introduction

In the 1960s Lauri Honko developed research methods in the field of folk-narrative which brought about a shift in Finnish folkloristics away from the paradigm of a diachronic orientation characteristic of the geographical-historical and typological school and towards a synchronic, functionalistic one.[1] Over the course of a number of years Honko elaborated a methodology within the tradition-ecological perspective, created a means of applying sociological role theory in the study of folklore, oversaw the debate on folkloristic theories of genre, fostered research on cultural identity and developed folkloristic fieldwork methods. A key tool in Lauri Honko's thinking was the concept of the paradigm. In his *Textualising the Siri Epic* Honko wrote:

> New paradigms grow out of the old ones by transforming the weaknesses of the latter into fields of innovative research. Just as the historical-geographic method has given way to genre analysis, the study of performance, tradition communication, tradition ecology, oral discourse analysis and a host of other approaches, ethnolinguistic methodology has sprouted various new disciplines from sociolinguistics to ethnopoetics. (Honko 1998: 46)

In the field of research into epic forms Lauri Honko's approach shifted the focus from the old literary theories to new perspectives with a focus on the textualisation of oral epics. In this paper I shall take closer look at the perspectives which he created.

In a tragic coincidence, Lauri Honko passed away on 15 July 2002, the very same day that the 6th international Folklore Fellows' Summer School was about to start. The teachers and participants knew him as the founder of the scholarly training school, and as the chief editor of the Folklore Fellows' Communications and *FF Network*. We had planned together the session on 'Epics and Creativity' scheduled for one of the following days.

Earlier that summer Professor Honko had mentioned an upcoming article, in which he intended

1 This paper is for to some extent based on earlier writings by the author: Harvilahti 2004a, 2004b, 2008.

to illustrate the main trends that had been a major influence in the process of developing the theoretical background and key concepts of folklore studies during the 1960s and 70s. Among the names he mentioned were such pioneers of our field as Arnold van Gennep (1873–1957), Carl von Sydow (1878–1952), and Martti Haavio (1899–1973).

In 1909 van Gennep published *Les rites de passage,* a work that was translated into English much later, in 1960. In 1924 van Gennep referred to historical, diachronic research as 'a maniac disease' of the nineteenth century. Van Gennep emphasised that every scholar in the field of folklore studies should master the basics of the biological sciences, since the phenomena of culture should be examined in their natural environment and context, just as the corresponding phenomena of biology were studied according to the modern principles of the time (van Gennep 1924: 32–6, *passim*). Carl von Sydow's most important concepts for the development of Scandinavian folklore scholarship may be listed as follows: 1) the perspective of genre analysis, 2) the concept of the oicotype, and 3) the distinction between active and passive tradition bearers (von Sydow 1948; see also Harvilahti 2012).

As Valdimar Hafstein (2001) has noted, in this connection we may talk about a biological metaphor in folklore studies. Interestingly, in folkloristics these ideas and concepts had already been formulated during the first half of the twentieth century, but since the geographical-historical school was so dominant in Finland, this impact did not result in any greater change in the methodological and theoretical principles. An essential shift, and even a new view of reality, was introduced in Finnish folkloristics in the late 1950s and early 1960s. According to Honko, Finnish folkloristics turned its attention from text to context, and from the products of folklore to the producers of folklore (Honko 1986). Honko maintained that the principles of functional analysis and perspectives of an ecology of tradition should replace the former geographical-historical orientation of the Finnish School.[2] In a methodological article published in 1961 Honko stated that functionalism did not get any firm foothold in Finnish ethnology and folkloristics until the 1950s. He continued that publishing such works as Bronislaw Malinowski's *Magic, Science and Religion* (1948, in Finnish 1960) might have triggered a heated debate between the comparative, historical

Lauri Honko lecturing on the Kalevala, Turku 1999. Cultural Studies Archives, University of Turku.

approach and the proponents of the functionalistic thinking some decades earlier, since the work was based solely on observing a living contemporary culture. Thus, in his words, functionalistic ideas arrived to Finland first as an approach 'subordinated as an expedient of its antagonist, the historical approach' (Honko 1961: 136).

New research trends introduced by Lauri Honko sought their methodology in functionalistic approaches to folklore, sociology, social psychology, cultural anthropology and the study of religion (Honko 1986). Some key concepts from these disciplines were thus deployed to develop the new methodology of folklore studies in Finland.

Lauri Honko admitted that strong elements of the phenomenological approach and sometimes even the influence of synchronic currents were also to be detected in some of the major works of the academician Martti Haavio (see, e.g., Honko 1986; Honko 1974: 112–17). However, Haavio remained a representative of the former (diachronically oriented) paradigm with his tradition-psychological and motif-historical thinking, although Carl von Sydow's theories influenced him to a great extent. It was the task of Lauri Honko to guide Finnish folkloristics (and the study of comparative religion) through a paradigm shift towards new perspectives.

The paradigm

The paradigm was a key conceptual tool in Lauri Honko's thinking. Honko used this concept basically in the same way as the philosopher Thomas S. Kuhn in his major work *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, published in 1962. Kuhn described the

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2   On the scientific background of functionalism see in detail Honko 1962: 86–158; Lehtipuro 1980: 12–14.

paradigm as a collection of beliefs shared by scientists, a kind of agreement as to how research problems are to be solved. Kuhn's theory involved the idea that the sciences develop in a successive transition from one paradigm to another through a process of revolution. Kuhn stated that a new paradigm could not be built on an earlier one. Kuhn himself noted that his ideas were comparable to Darwin's ideas about the evolution of organisms.

To illustrate the use of this key concept, I present here some of Lauri Honko's central perspectives on the theory of folklore genres:

> The majority of folklorists analyse their view of reality by accepting the idea of an oral tradition divided into genres and systems of genres. This is one of the fundamental paradigms of folkloristics, and one that is constantly providing models for research and the answers to problems. Debate in genre theory has in recent years embraced innovative and critical elements to such an extent that we may speak of a productive and viable paradigm. (Honko 1989: 14)

The last sentences in the above citation are of major importance. Honko stresses that a paradigm does not form axiomatic laws, as Kuhn had stated, but rather remains as an object of debate and may have links with other paradigms. Thus, Honko suggested that we

> …permit stimuli taken from discourse analysis and text linguistics to add a new dimension to the folkloristic study of genre, even if this to some extent expanded the concept of genre at present prevailing (Honko 1989: 14).

The debate, even antagonism, between the paradigms is clearly also seen in Lauri Honko's views on epics. The antagonism culminated in regarding the long epic as a product of written culture (the old school) and emphasising the existence of long, orally performed epics in Central Asia, India, Africa and Oceania (the new approaches) (Honko 1998: 18).

I will examine three cases that represent Honko's paradigms in the field of epic studies:

1. *A literary folk epic based on an oral tradition*: the 'singing scribe' Elias Lönnrot, who compiled a number of versions of his *Kalevala* on the basis of Kalevala-metric folk poems.
2. *An epic based on multimedia documentation/ fieldwork*: the Siri Epic, sung by Gopala Naika.

He was an erudite singer, who used to perform the epic on ritual occasions or in the work-song context.
3. *An epic based on an archived oral tradition*: the long epic of the Setu female singer Anne Vabarna, who produced a twin epic with the encouragement of the collector Armas Otto Väisänen, who dreamt about writing down such an epic.

These three examples all belong to the 'second life' of folklore in the sense that all of them have been produced outside the 'system of communication' which maintains folklore in its original setting (Honko 1998: 18).

The Kalevala

As for the *Kalevala*, Lauri Honko regarded Lönnrot as the creator and compiler of the Finnish national epic in his role as a singing scribe, who likened himself to the performers of the songs in the Kalevala metre. The second life of the folklore was in this case activated by Elias Lönnrot. The 'dead and ineffective', dormant materials were recontextualized in the form of an epic. The material, detached from its original background served new goals and purposes in the context of creating a picture of a bygone golden age. Honko criticised Romantic theories for an idolisation of the people and the proponents of the idea of mysterious, collective processes of tradition which do not need a poet, not even an anonymous one. We can trace the influence of such theories to the times of J. G. von Herder and such proponents of the Finnish geographical-historical school as Martti Haavio, not forgetting Henrik Gabriel Porthan and his students, or the Romantic views of the implementers of Finnish nationalist policy (Honko 1990: 185–93, 220–3). Lauri Honko wrote:

> …it was in the light of the Romantic view that the Kalevala, too, had to be produced and received. No one was so brave as to question the realism of this epic concept, or even to launch an open debate on its inherent inconsistencies. Many, suffering beneath the yoke of a model theory, failed to recognise that there were any problems. We may in this sense speak of a tyrannising epic theory, and the tyranny seems to continue even today. It even acts as an obstacle to the comparative study of epics by engendering biased expectations, just as if the Romantic view of the epic were a yardstick for all epics.

A clear traumatic tendency thus appears from time to time in debate – researchers, who without further analysis brand the Kalevala as, say, a fake. One may well ask, a fake of what? Such researchers prefer, it seems, to adhere to the Romantic concept rather than to debate the question of how the various folk epics in the world actually came into being. (Honko 1990: 226)

This was the main task of Lauri Honko in the field of epic studies: to develop a theory on 'how the folk epics came into being'.

One idea that was left uncompleted was the comparison of different versions of Elias Lönnrot's *Kalevala*. The planned analysis was based on a computerized corpus of five published versions of the *Kalevala* that included the preliminary versions of the *Kalevala*, the so-called *Old Kalevala* of 1835 and the *New Kalevala* of 1849. This idea remained unfulfilled, but it is really a marvellous task for future research.

The Siri Epic

In December 1990 Lauri Honko, with his Finnish–Indian team, recorded an epic on video and audiotape that was subsequently called the Siri Epic of the Tulu people of southern Karnataka. The epic was performed by the singer and possession-priest Gopala Naika, and it consists of a total of 15,683 poetic verses. This erudite singer used to perform the epic on ritual occasions or in the work-song context. Gopala Naika performed the epic in 1990 for the first time in his life as a long epic, detached from the normal perform-

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The Siri Festival in Nidgal, Karnataka 1989. Gopala Naika on the left.

ance contexts (Honko 1998: 15; Foley 2002: 172). In 1998 this epic, only five lines shorter than the *Iliad*, was published in Tulu and English in two volumes (Honko *et al.* 1998, FFC 265–6). A third volume, entitled *Textualising the Siri Epic* (Honko 1998, FFC 264), is an introduction to the methodology of the textualisation process of oral epics. Lauri Honko predicted a new paradigm in epic research that would emphasise multimedia documentation on video, audio and still-camera.

Honko saw in multiple documentation a potential 'to satisfy the interest in the verbal text of the epic, the details of its performance, and the integration of the epic singing into a wider ritual process' (Honko 1998: 50). His prediction was as follows:

> The performance paradigm will one day give way to another paradigm, probably emergent in present-day research. Judging by the weaknesses of the performance approach and by the general pattern of paradigm shift, it should be possible to cast a prediction. Just as 'performance' relativised 'text', the next paradigm may relativise 'performance'. (Honko 1998: 50–1; Honko 2000: 11–13)

The Maiden's Death Song & The Great Wedding

In 1923 the Finnish ethnomusicologist A. O. Väisänen encouraged Anne Vabarna, the Setu singer from south-eastern Estonia, to sing at length. The fieldwork period resulted in the production of two epics: *The Great Wedding* of 5,595 lines, and *The Maiden's Death Song*, of 1,662 lines. The epic was dictated to A. O. Väisänen. In 'natural' situations the songs were normally performed as separate, shorter songs by a lead singer and a choir.

These two epics were written down into two notebooks by A. O. Väisänen, and are now stored in the collections of the Finnish Literature Society.

In an article published by Armas Otto Väisänen in the Estonian daily *Päeväleht* the same year (1923: 4, translated in Honko *et al.* 2003: 17–18), the collector wrote:

> The author of this article did not play much part in composing *The Great Wedding*. The wedding epic would have swelled too extensively, had the singer been allowed to fill it with her entire repertoire of songs of thanks, eating songs and wedding laments. The scribe regarded as his duty to hold back and gently guide
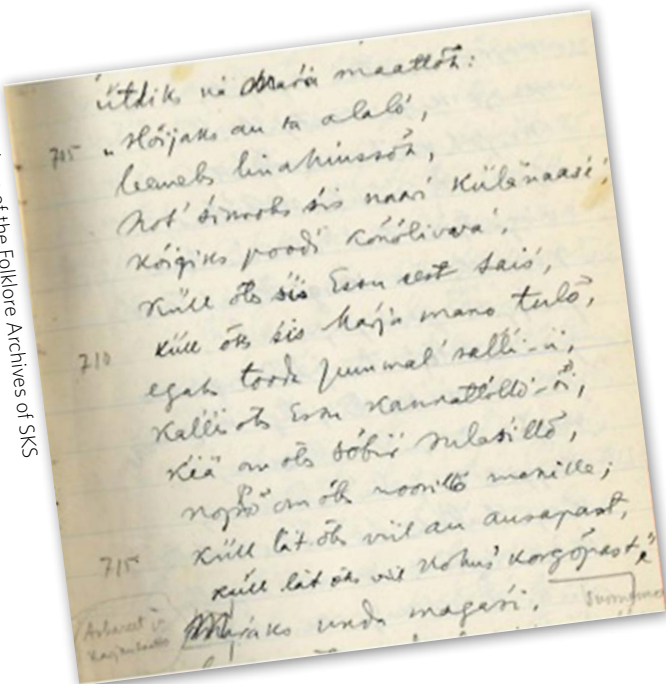
One of A. O. Väisänen's notebooks. Collections of the Folklore Archives of SKS.

Pegasus in order to avoid excessive repetition and to let the flow of action dominate. (Honko *et al.* 2003: 17, 157)

We will never know what all this guidance involved.

As for the composition of the twin epic, there is a forking or bifurcation point after the introductory sections (around 700 lines). There were alternative ways forward from here; either that the maiden accepted the marriage proposal and prepared herself for the great wedding, or rejected the proposal, died and had to undergo the funeral ceremony as a 'daughter of Jesus'. In Väisänen's article there is one remarkable note: Vabarna had told her daughter that the 'Finnish Gentleman' was writing down her death song and the daughter advised her mother to sing happy, not sad songs. Consequently, Vabarna performed first the happy end, following the path of marriage, that is to say, *The Great Wedding*, and only after that did she return to the point of divergence and continue along the path of death, *The Maiden's Death Song* (Honko *et al.* 2003: 17, 157).

Lauri Honko was, together with his team, preparing this twin epic for publication when he suddenly died. The work was completed by Anneli Honko and Paul Hagu.

In the folklore archives of the Finnish Literature Society (SKS) there is a collection of songs performed by Anne Vabarna and the choir. Väisänen recorded the songs by means of a phonograph during a singing

festival, organised in Finland. The ethnomusicological perspective in research into the Setu folk culture is of major importance, but in this paper I will not go any deeper into it. It is enough to state that the entirety of archived materials (in this case songs dictated to the collector, ethnographic descriptions, phonograph recordings and photographs) reflect the natural existence of folklore more truly than, say, one manuscript of an epic written down from dictation. However, the twin epic written down by Armas Otto Väisänen is a representative example of the (en)textualisation of oral epics and at the same time it belongs to the second life of folklore, produced without the attendance of the traditional community.

A tool-kit for the textualisation of epics

In Lauri Honko's works (the Siri Epic and the Setu Twin Epic) the term 'multiform' is used in order to resolve the dilemmas of epic composition. Multiforms are defined as 'repeatable and artistic expressions of variable length, which are constitutive for narration and function as generic markers' (Honko and Honko 1998: 35; Honko 1998:100). The result of the process of creating the epic texts depends on such guiding factors as situational context, mode of performance and performative style.

A. O. Väisänen and Anna Raudkats in Setumaa, 1913.

Anne Vabarna with her family. Photo by A. O. Väisänen.

Another term introduced in Honko's study is the concept of 'mental text'. I quote in the following his definition of this term:

> To be able to understand the production of text in actual performance, it seems necessary to postulate a kind of 'pre-narrative', a pre-textual frame, i.e., an organized structure of relevant conscious and unconscious material present in the singer's mind. This pre-existent module seems to consist of 1) storylines, 2) textual elements, i.e. episodic patterns, images of epic situations, multiforms, etc., and 3) their generic rules of reproduction as well as 4) contextual frames such as remembrances of earlier performances, yet not as a haphazard collection of traditional knowledge but, in the case of distinct epics of the active repertoire, a prearranged set of elements internalized by the individual singer. (Honko 1996: 4–5)

One prerequisite for the fluency of the traditional process of performance is the use of pre-existing groups of words, formulas and episodes, which rely on primary features such as those Honko mentions above – the 'pre-textual frame', 'pre-existing modules' or a 'pre-arranged set of elements'. John Miles Foley has written about 'traditional oral phraseology', 'register', and 'idiomatic devices'. According to Foley, traditional oral phraseology functions in oral texts as a register, as a storage of idiomatic means of communication. The register plays an important role for the singer in producing oral epics, but it is equally important for the audience, for the process of reception. Traditional registers may survive in the post-oral texts – in this case the reader, as an equivalent of the listener of the oral performances, has to be aware of these idiomatic devices in order to be able to decode the meanings of the narrative patterns. The basic challenge 'is to ask not only what the poems mean, but also, and more fundamentally how they mean'. In this respect he has paid a lot of attention to the singer's own cognitive units of utterance of the idiomatic storytelling language, and network of inherent meanings (Foley 2003: 252). The use of idiomatic strategies and registers explains the technique utilised in performing long epics.

One meets several accounts of singers who could repeat songs after a single hearing, and compose new songs on a given subject or theme. Verses activated in the working memory, verbalized ideas, reactivate in turn new metonymic integers, which for their part are verbalized at the level of the metrical line. The more often the singer performs the same epic theme, the more fixed become not only the links between the overall structure, core subject matter and micro-level elements, but also the features characteristic of the singer's idiolect. This explains why singers develop their own idiosyncratic styles of singing despite the idiomatic registers of oral poetry (Harvilahti 1992: 147).

Conclusion

Textualization of Oral Epics, a book edited by Lauri Honko, begins with the following words: 'The task of textualizing oral epics in writing is a mission impossible' (Honko 2000: vii). By this he meant that oral performances cannot be captured in words and letters, since many features of expression (such as gesture and music) are left out in the process of written codification. This concerns the intertextual construction of meaning, and the processes of reception, as well as the lack of traditional knowledge. The written codification involves intersemiotic translation, and the 'second life' of the epic.

Coming back to the title of the paper I might reformulate the phrase as 'Oral epics, a mission

completed': to my mind, the mission of textualising oral epics was completed within the confines of the paradigm of Lauri Honko. As he himself has stated (1989: 14): 'Any scientific paradigm has an element of tension and problems of definition and understanding. A paradigm always contains implicit assumptions, new interpretations and links with some other paradigm.' The road is well paved, and the work continues.

In retrospect

The paradigm shift that Honko emphasised was to a large extent technologically based. He produced important insights on such topics as using video documentation in folkloristic fieldwork, the possibilities of computer sciences and the future perspectives of word processing. As far back as 1984 he made a prediction in an article entitled 'The functionality of the folklore archives' (Honko 1984: 25):

> In our range of vision there is a time in which a researcher may bring home his material in a portfolio of computer discs, type-set the text at home, and send the faultless result over the telephone to the printing-house. No intermediary hands will hamper the process. The typo demon might well put in an application for a disability pension. ■

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