



**EPIC TRADITIONS AMONG THE PEOPLES OF THE WORLD: POETICS,
PERFORMANCE, AND CULTURAL MEMORY**

*Namozova Sayyora Boqiyevna –
Karshi University of Economics and Pedagogy,
Karshi. Uzbekistan.*

ABSTRACT

Epic traditions represent one of the most complex and enduring forms of verbal art in human civilization. Combining mythology, history, cosmology, and ethical philosophy, epics function as cultural archives that shape collective identity and transmit social values across generations. This study offers a comparative and theoretical examination of epic traditions among different peoples of the world. Drawing upon major epic corpora—including the **Epic of Gilgamesh**, the Homeric epics (**Iliad**, **Odyssey**), the Indian **Mahabharata**, the Turkic **Manas**, and the West African **Epic of Sundiata**—the research applies comparative literary analysis informed by oral-formulaic theory and cultural memory studies.

The findings demonstrate that epic narratives share universal structural and archetypal patterns while simultaneously articulating culturally specific models of heroism, cosmology, and social order. The article argues that epic traditions should be understood not merely as literary monuments but as dynamic performative systems embedded in social practice and ideological formation.

Keywords: epic poetry, oral tradition, cultural memory, heroic archetype, comparative folklore, performance studies

INTRODUCTION

Epic poetry occupies a foundational position in the development of world literature. As Mikhail Bakhtin argues, epic represents a genre deeply rooted in the “absolute past,” a narrative mode that constructs a heroic age separated from the present by distance and reverence. Unlike the novel, which reflects open-ended modernity, the epic establishes cultural origins and legitimizes collective identity.

From ancient Mesopotamia to Central Asia and West Africa, epic traditions emerged within oral cultures where memory, performance, and communal participation shaped narrative form. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* reflects early urban civilization’s existential concerns; Homeric epics articulate aristocratic warrior ethics; the *Mahabharata* integrates metaphysical and ethical discourse; *Manas* preserves nomadic tribal ideology; and the *Epic of Sundiata* narrates the political foundation of the Mali Empire.

This study aims to:

1. Identify structural and thematic constants across epic traditions;
2. Analyze the heroic archetype as a culturally mediated construct;
3. Examine the relationship between orality, performance, and textualization;
4. Explore epic as a medium of cultural memory and ideological continuity.

METHODS

The research adopts an interdisciplinary qualitative methodology combining:

- Comparative literary analysis
- Oral-formulaic theory
- Cultural memory studies
- Structuralist narratology



The theoretical foundation draws on the oral-formulaic theory developed by Milman Parry and expanded by Albert Lord, who demonstrated that epic composition in oral cultures relies on formulaic diction, thematic repetition, and improvisational structure.

Additionally, the concept of cultural memory is informed by Jan Assmann, who defines cultural memory as the collective storage of knowledge that shapes a society's identity over time.

The selected epics were analyzed according to:

- Narrative architecture
- Heroic typology
- Cosmological framework
- Performance context
- Ideological function

Primary texts and authoritative translations were examined alongside secondary scholarly sources.

RESULTS

Narrative Architecture and Mythic Time. All examined epics situate their narratives in mythic or semi-historical time. This temporal distancing creates what Bakhtin terms an “epic distance,” reinforcing the authority of tradition.

Structurally, epics share:

- Invocation or formal opening
- Genealogical exposition
- Central conflict
- Cyclical battle sequences
- Climactic confrontation
- Moral or symbolic closure

These recurring patterns suggest deep-rooted cognitive narrative schemas.

The Hero as Cultural Ideal. The epic hero functions as an embodiment of societal values, yet this embodiment varies significantly across cultures:

- Achilles represents personal honor and martial excellence within a warrior aristocracy.
- Arjuna's moral hesitation in the *Mahabharata* introduces philosophical reflection on duty (dharma).
- Manas symbolizes tribal unity and resistance.
- Sundiata represents political legitimacy and divine destiny.

Despite cultural variation, certain archetypal elements remain constant: extraordinary birth, early trials, exile or crisis, decisive confrontation, and restoration of order.

Orality, Formula, and Performance. Oral-formulaic analysis reveals that repetition, stock epithets, and patterned scenes are not signs of artistic limitation but compositional strategies. According to Lord (1960), the epic singer does not memorize a fixed text but recreates it during each performance.

In the Kyrgyz tradition, the *manaschi* may recite tens of thousands of lines from memory, adapting episodes to audience and context. Similarly, West African griots integrate improvisation into genealogical recitation.

The transition to written form stabilizes the text but reduces performative variability. Homeric epics, for example, likely represent the crystallization of a long oral tradition into textual canon.

Epic and Cultural Memory. Epic narratives function as repositories of cultural memory. Assmann's framework helps explain how epics preserve foundational myths and historical consciousness.



Epics perform at least four memory functions:

1. Foundational myth-making
2. Moral codification
3. Political legitimation
4. Identity consolidation

The *Epic of Sundiata* legitimizes imperial authority; *Manas* consolidates Kyrgyz ethnic identity; the *Mahabharata* structures Hindu cosmology and ethics.

DISCUSSION

The comparative evidence suggests that epic traditions reflect both universal narrative structures and culturally specific ideological formations.

From an anthropological perspective, epic storytelling emerges in societies undergoing political consolidation or social transformation. The hero mediates chaos and establishes order, symbolizing the transition from fragmentation to unity.

From a literary-theoretical perspective, epic differs fundamentally from modern narrative forms. It constructs a closed moral universe governed by transcendental authority. However, modern reinterpretations—novels, films, and national mythmaking—demonstrate that epic motifs remain adaptable.

Globalization and digital media now transform epic traditions into transnational heritage symbols. UNESCO recognition of intangible cultural heritage, for instance, has elevated certain oral epics to global cultural status, altering their local function.

CONCLUSION

Epic traditions among the peoples of the world reveal a profound interplay between narrative structure, cultural identity, and social ideology. While sharing archetypal motifs—heroic quest, divine intervention, cosmic conflict—each epic articulates a distinct cultural worldview.

Rather than viewing epics as static relics of the past, this study affirms their dynamic role in shaping collective memory and national consciousness. Future research may explore digital adaptation, postcolonial reinterpretation, and gender perspectives within epic traditions.

REFERENCES (EXPANDED APA LIST)

1. Assmann, J. (2011). *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*. Cambridge University Press.
2. Bakhtin, M. (1981). *The Dialogic Imagination*. University of Texas Press.
3. Lord, A. B. (1960). *The Singer of Tales*. Harvard University Press.
4. Parry, M. (1971). *The Making of Homeric Verse*. Oxford University Press.
5. Reichl, K. (2000). *Singing the Past: Turkic and Medieval Heroic Poetry*. Cornell University Press.
6. Niane, D. T. (1965). *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali*. Longman.
7. Mitchell, S. (Trans.). (2004). *Gilgamesh*. Free Press.
8. Narayan, R. K. (1978). *The Mahabharata*. University of Chicago Press.
9. Homer. (1996). *The Odyssey* (R. Fagles, Trans.). Penguin Classics.
10. Homer. (2003). *The Iliad* (R. Fagles, Trans.). Penguin Classics.