

Alliterative and Rhymed Heroic Epic

Ural-Altai language structures are remarkable for agglutination and vowel harmony. They belong to the **consonantal type** of languages where only consonants are phonologically relevant and vowels lack distinctive validity. They are of changeable nature since they alternate according to the vowel quality in the first syllable. As a result, their poetic prosody relies on **consonance**, on the repetition and concord of consonant sounds at the beginning or at the end of the verse. Consonance is predominantly employed by Ural-Altai alliterative and rhymed heroic epic. Its natural homeland is in steppe grasslands of Central Asia amidst pastoralist nations herding the horse, camel and sheep. If such versification appears in European and African literatures, it is due to warrior castes of remote eastern descent. They made raids on peaceful peasant communities and established themselves in their settlements as a ruling feudal aristocracy. A tentative hypothesis says that all heroic epic in world literatures can be attributed safely to **eastern herdsmen** from the Middle East.

Ural-Altai languages differ in the position of word stress, the hunters and herdsmen of northern Eurasia place the accent on the word-initial syllable, whereas the nomadic fishermen of southern marshlands tend to lay the stress on the word-final ultimate or penultimate. Nowadays most Ural-Altai languages exhibit **progressive vowel harmony** regulating the quality of word-medial vowels and vowels in word-final agglutinative suffixes according to the word-initial prima, *i.e.* the initial syllable bearing a heavy word stress. If the initial syllable contains *i* or *e*, the syllables that follow undergo fronting, if it contains *u* or *o*, they undergo backing. Less common is **regressive vowel harmony** regulating quality of vowel series according to the last stressed syllables. It is found in Germanic languages but it may have operated in higher rates among Turco-Tungusoid languages owing to the stress laid on the ultimate and penultimate syllable.

Be it as it may, the present state of prosodic accentuation favours end rhyme as a progressive technique of versification while **alliteration** (head rhyme, stave rhyme) is definitely receding. Alliteration applied verse-initial and word-initial consonance in the heroic epic of steppe grasslands in the Middle East. **Rhyming**, on the other hand, employed verse-final consonance and prevailed in the oral folklore of southern Trans-Caspian marshlands. Both types of prosody relied on a regular repetition of consonants but differed owing to the position of word stress. Wilhelm Radloff, the German editor Kyrgyz epic on Manas, noticed a close interrelationship between **accentual versification**, heavy stress, regular rhythm and the galloping of the horse: "It is clear that the [Kyrgyz] people, who very much enjoy an eloquent language, consider a

rhythmic speech as the highest art in the world.”¹ They wanted the string instrument *dombira* to imitate the rhythm of horses’ hooves.

Alliterative verse in Mongolian and Uralic languages originated from strong accent laid on the onset of words, stichs and sentences. Turcoid languages placed the accent on final syllables and hence they got accustomed to end rhymes. This bipartition is not contradicted by the occasional occurrence of head rhyme in Kazakh and Kyrgyz epic poetry. What really matters are not linguistic frontiers but intertwining between steppe herdsmen and nomadic fishermen with complementary goat-keeping subsistence.

Another important phonetic trait of Ural-Altai languages is the abundance of guttural and laryngeal consonants and lip-rounding attached even to the pronunciation of front rounded vowels *ö, ü*. Their popularity is shown in the guttural and laryngeal *kay*-singing. The Kumandin tribes resort to *kay*-singing when the shaman precursor sings heroic epic and hunting-songs addressed to the spirit-lord of the mountains. Such ceremonies are held in the evening before hunting expeditions and intend to beg of the spirit a few gifts of game for tomorrow’s hunting.² The Saamic and Samoyedic languages are also included into the Ural-Altai family but exhibit an opposite tendency to palatal pronunciation. Their velar and guttural consonants undergo palatalisation and their vowels *u, o, a* undergo fronting. Instead of *kay*-singing they give preference to palatal *yoik*-singing similar to the Tyrolese yodelling. It is remarkable for high rises of the pitch register during one syllable.

Initial head rhyming found favourable conditions in the northern belt of the Chudic (Scythian) peoples roaming from steppes of Central Asia (Mongolian and Kyrgyz literature) to the Baltic countries (Estonian, Finnish literatures) and through Scandinavia to Scotland and the British Isles. Turkic literatures are divided, the Turkish epic (*dāstān*) centres round the hero Dede Korkut and its pivot work *The Book of Dede Korkut* was written in rhymes. The Mongolian heroic epic (*tuuli*) celebrates the deeds of the ancient king Gesar and makes use of alliterative verse. *The Epic of King Gesar* is recited in numerous versions in Tibetan, Mongolian and Buryat. In China it is popular in several islets occupied formerly by Mongolian invaders.

The heroic epic of Central Asia is a later outgrowth of **heroic sagas** called *ölön* in Turkic languages. Sagas were told by shamans, soothsayers and elderly persons during evening gatherings, while heroic epic was sung in astropheric

¹ V. Radlov: *Obraztsy narodnoi literatury severnykh tiurkskikh plemen*. In: *Entsiklopedicheskii fenomen eposa Manas: sbornik statei*. Bishkek: Muras, 1995, p. 25.

² John Bryan Hainsworth - Arthur Thomas Hatto: *Traditions of Heroic and Epic Poetry: Characteristics and Techniques*. MHRA, 1989, p. 187.

verses by professional rhapsodes in accompaniment of string instruments during feasts held at courts of khans. Turkic, Tungus and Manchu epic reminded nostalgic elegiac ballads and often treated religious meditative topics. It represented a hybrid phenomenon in the intersection of steppe grasslands and Trans-Caspian marshlands.

The residual distribution of alliterative verse exhibits significantly high coincidence with chordaphones denoted as **lyres**. Homeric epic was sung in accompaniment of the lyre and dealt with the Mycenaean expedition to Troy. The Bronze Age Mycenaean culture brought the earliest evidence of lyre-players (*ru-ra-ta-e*) as early as 1400 BC and revealed affiliation with the rulers of the Sumerian city-state Ur, whose excavations of lyres date from 2500 BC. Both cultures buried their kings in domelike tumuli related to Scythian kurgans and provided them with Scythoid golden masques. In Central Asia, Europe and Africa the accompaniment of heroic epic was associated with bow-shaped stringed musical instruments arisen as derivations of the lyre. The first lyres obviously originated as a by-product of bows. The invention of bows was probably due to the Asiatic big-game hunters chasing Siberian mammoths and via the Bering Strait their use was transplanted by Algonquian buffalo-hunters also to North America.

Nowadays most Uralic and Sarmatoid languages use the collective *t*-plurals whereas and the Basco-Scythian languages abound in distinctive *k*-duals. Both suffixes are united only in Khoisan, Hottentot and Maasai languages in the south and in the Palaeo-Siberian languages (Koryak, Eskimo, Chukchee) in the north. A tentative conclusion surmises that both brotherly branches originally comprised collective *t*-plurals and dual *k*-plurals at the same time and excelled in composing songs with consonance and syntactic parallelism. In the Bronze Age the Megalith tribes transported their domelike architecture and alliterative poetry to Scandinavia and the British Isles. In the Iron Age they were followed by the raids of Hallstatt tribes migrating with horse-drawn chariots from the east of Europe. The later predominance of rhymed heroic epic is to be explained by numerous overreaches of steppe herdsmen in the southern areas of Turkic-speaking countries and accepting their rhyming versification.

We can successfully compare **rhymed heroic epic** in various countries because it was composed by kindred castes of professional rhapsodes and warriors, who recruited from eastern raiders and fortified hill forts in conquered European princedoms. They may be identified with the Hallstatt people drifting through Puszta grasslands up the Danube from the Sintashta-Petrovka culture (2000 BC). They lived as nomads in horse-drawn chariots and also buried their dead in chariot graves but gained military superiority thanks to iron weapons. Their most dreaded weapon was the bow with iron arrowheads. This technological innovation allowed them to invent as its by-

product a wide variety of string musical instruments. As a result, most herdsmen and cattle-breeders in Asia, Europe and Africa tend to celebrate brave deeds of their legendary heroes in verses of rhymed epic sung by a single rhapsode with accompaniment of lutes, lyres or kitharas.

The tribes of the Sintashta-Petrovka culture must have been of Sarmatian extraction remarkable for Ossetic *t*-plurals. They were akin to Scythians, who led a nomadic life in horse saddles and buried dead chieftains in kurgan mounds of copular shape. Both ethnic groups were Iranised by Central Asian peasantry but bore indiscernible resemblance to Mongolian horseback riders in steppes of Siberia. Their earliest forefathers probably survived in remains amidst Palaeo-Siberian languages (Koryak, Kerek, Chukchee, Eskimo) spoken by tribes with copular beehive *chums*. These languages comprise collective *t*-plurals and distinctive *k*-duals whereas their daughter families split into two separate ethnic branches, Sarmatoids with quadrangular hillforts and *t*-plurals and Scythoids with domelike beehive houses, circular hillforts and *k*-plurals.

The Scythians invaded Europe along the northern route via Scandinavia and the southern route via Anatolia and the Thracian tumulus culture. The northern migration corridor was formed by Ugrian, Hungarian, Ingrian, Vepsian, Varangian and Chudic tribes that formerly belonged to *Magna Scythia*. Its extensive realm continued westward to Cassiodorus' and Jordanes' *Scandza* 'Scandinavia' and ended in Scotia attributed by Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Scythian stock. This may be the reason why alliterative prosody abounds in Mongolian, Estonian, Finnish, Scandinavian and Scottish heroic epic. Its distribution seems to betray prehistoric Scythian migrations along the northern Scandinavian route, whereas southern colonisations due to Thracian *tumuli* left only few reliable traces of alliterative poetry.

Rare relics of alliteration are found in Provençal *chansons de geste*. In Spain it was cultivated by the troubadour Guirautz Riquiers of Narbonne, who created epic compositions at the Castilian court of the king Alfons the Wise in the 12th century. The surviving torchbringers of Megalith architecture in Spain are seen in the Basques and its roots are attributed to Berbers in North Africa. The Berberian oral lore is rich in alliterative tongue twisters and the Berberian author Appuleius was renowned for combining alliteration with interior rhyme. The prehistoric Megalith People landed on the Horn of Africa and this explains the high occurrence of stave-rhyme in Somaliland.¹ The Somali name for alliteration is *higaadsan* and it enables an arbitrary initial vowel to alliterate

¹ Martin Orwin: *Alliteration in Somali Poetry*, In: Jonathan Roper: *Alliteration in Culture*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, 219ff.

with all other vowels. For Somali poetry it is common that successions of even one hundred verse lines begin with the same initial consonant.¹

One mainstream of Megalith Peoples migrated through Pakistan and the Deccan Mountains in South India to the Sumba Island in Indonesia. As a result, rare occurrence of alliteration is evidenced in Sanskrit *Shlokas*² invented by Valmiki, who wrote *Ramayana*. Its Dravidian continuation is found in the *akaval* verse form of Tamil poetry. Its every line comprises four feet (*cirs*) composed of two syllables (*acais*). The lines are linked by assonance and alliteration. Such versification was discovered also in the prosaic passages of the Tamil composition *Cilappatikaram*.

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¹ B. W. Andrzejewski – I. M. Lewis: *Somali Poetry; an Introduction*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1964, p. 42-3.

² Kalanath N. Jha: *Figurative Poetry in Sanskrit Literature*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1975.